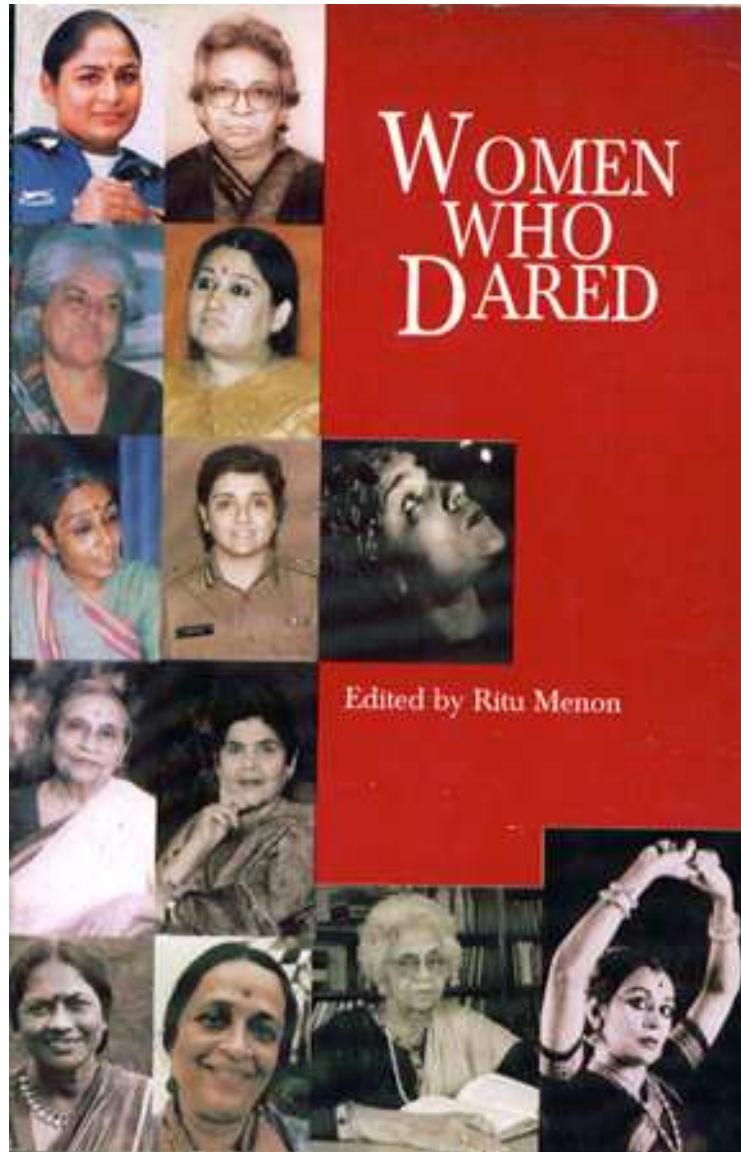


WOMEN WHO DARED

Edited by Ritu Menon

(Published by the National Book Trust, New Delhi India, Price Rs 75 only)



Ammanige
(To My Mother)

SA USHA

Mother, don't, please don't
Don't cut off the sunlight
With your sari spread across the sky
Blanching life's green leaves

Don't say: you're seventeen already
Don't flash your sari in the street
Don't make eyes at passers-by
Don't be a tomboy riding the winds

Don't play that tune again
That your mother,
Her mother and her mother
Had played on the snake-charmer's flute
Into the ears of nitwits like me

I am just spreading my hood
I'll sink my fangs into someone
And leave my venom.
Let go, make way.

Circumambulating the holy plant
In the yard, making rangoli designs
To see heaven, turning up dead
Without light and air.

For God's sake, I can't do it.

*Breaking out of the dam
You've built, swelling
In a thunderstorm
Roaring through the land,
Let me live very differently
From you, mother.
Let go, make way.*

(Tr. A. K. Ramanujan)

Introduction

For at least a century and a half now, the presence of women in the social and public life of India has been noted, even if they have only been intermittently and sporadically visible, and insufficiently acknowledged. Most people, when asked, will recall women's participation in the freedom struggle, their mobilisation by the thousands in Gandhiji's campaigns against the British, in the salt *satyagraha*, and in the civil disobedience and non-cooperation movements. Others will remember how active they were in social reform in Bengal, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and other parts of undivided India; while those more politically inclined will emphasize their role in major events such as the Chittagong Armoury Raid, the Telengana armed struggle, and the underground resistances of Bhagat Singh, Bhagwati Charan and others; their participation in the Indian National Congress, the Communist Party of India and diverse other social and political organisations. Names like Preetilata, Kalpana Joshi, Satyawati, Acchamamba, Durga Behen; Mridula Sarabhai, Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Kasturba Gandhi, Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Ammu Swaminadhan, Lakshmi Sahgal, Manikuntala Sen, Asoka Gupta; like Madame Bhikaji Cama, Kamila Tyabji, the Begum of Bhopal, Mahadevi Varma, Balamani Amma, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Pandita Ramabai, Sarala Debi Ghoshal, Anandibai Joshi, Sister Nivedita, Mirabehn, Annie Besant and many, many others come to mind as women who rebelled against living their lives as is normally prescribed for women—that is, as daughters, wives, mothers, and sisters. Rather, they chose to live as women who wished to make a contribution to their country, to society, to people and their struggles, whatever those struggles may be. They did not stop to wonder what the world would say, they didn't wait for anyone's approval nor did they ask for

their permission— they simply went ahead and did what they believed responsible and socially conscious people in India should do, and by so doing, enriched the life of the country. Despite this, however, women have generally been in the margins of history, absent in most reckonings.

When India attained independence in 1947 at least one promise of freedom was fulfilled, and one goal that all these women fought for, in their different ways, by different means, accomplished: the formal emancipation of women and the granting of franchise to them in their own right. This was followed by the enunciation of a remarkable array of rights and guarantees to *all* Indian citizens by the Constitution of India, one of the most radical and forward-looking documents in the world. It recognises the fundamental right of all its citizens—the right to education, to shelter, to dignity, to health, to food, and to work— no matter what their caste or community, colour or race, religion or creed, or gender. It also recognises the essential *equality* of all people. But because equality in real life is not assured to all of us, it asks the state to guarantee that it will do whatever it has to, to ensure that this equal status becomes a reality for everyone. Unfortunately, the promise held out in those early years of our independence has only been partly fulfilled. Fifty years after independence women in India are still very unequal, and still mostly un-free, despite the struggles and sacrifices all those women made almost a hundred years ago.

Let me mention just a few facts to illustrate this point.

Unlike the rest of the world, in India there are more men than women— 1000 men for 933 women. This is because many young girls die before they become adults.

Most women and girls eat much less than they need for most of their lives. Experts call this a state of “nutritional stress”, because they eat last and they eat less. Only 54 per cent of women in India are literate. Only half the number of women, compared to men, are enrolled in school, and many drop out much before they finish because they are required at home to look after younger children and help with housework. The majority of Indian women are married by the age of 17, and by the time they are 22, most of them have at least two children, if not more.

Although women work all the time, and in fact work more than men, only 20 per cent are in the paid workforce. Those who *are* in the workforce get paid much less than men, even though there is a law in India that guarantees equal pay for equal work.

In the late nineteen-sixties and seventies there was a revival of women's activism in the country, in what has come to be known as the second wave of the women's movement in India. A series of small and big struggles—in Uttarakhand with an anti-alcohol struggle led by Sarala-behen and Mirabehen; in *Naxalbari* in West Bengal; in Maharashtra with the anti-price rise agitation; in Gujarat with the *Nav Nirman* movement; in Hyderabad, with the Progressive Organisation of Women; in Ahmedabad with the formation of the Self-Employed Women's Association, the first women's trade union in the country—triggered this resurgence. At the same time, a couple of other catalysts in the shape of international and national initiatives also added their impetus to this activism. These were the declaration by the United Nations in 1975 of the UN Decade for Women, 1975-85; and the setting up of the Committee on the Status of Women in India by the central government, as an inspired move to systematically and comprehensively evaluate the status of women across region, class and community. The landmark report produced by the CSWI, *Towards Equality*, immediately became a benchmark for policy-makers within the government; but, more importantly, it focussed attention on the worsening situation of women in many respects, and on their increasing subordination. It did so by pinpointing the structural and institutional forms of discrimination against women, and highlighting the failure of the state to deliver on Constitutional guarantees for at least one half of its citizens.

Towards Equality was followed by another path-breaking report in 1988, *Shram Shakti*, which was a detailed documentation of women working in the informal or unorganised sector in India—which is where almost 90 per cent of women work. The publication and findings of these two reports galvanised both the women's movement, as well as the nascent discipline of women's studies, as activists felt the need for concrete information and analysis to enable them to deal with the situation on the ground; and researchers and academics realised the importance of collating, analysing and theorising on the basis of empirical data and the lived experience of women. Together, all this academic and activist work forced the government and policy-makers to acknowledge the systematic and systemic discrimination against women, and to evolve policies and programmes that would genuinely empower them and enable them to take their rightful place in their country's social, economic and political life. The details of the movement's significant contribution in this regard and its far-reaching impact need not detain us here; suffice it to say that it has been one of the most important social and political movements of the twentieth century.

Within the universities, credit for pressing against the boundaries must go to those individual feminist teachers and researchers who have deconstructed texts, challenged disciplinary orthodoxies, innovated with methodology, and fought for space within the academic establishment for a gender perspective in all the disciplines. Often they have been reproached or even penalised for their activism—the very activism that may have propelled them into a re-examination of their research and teaching in the first place. For along with pursuing their careers, they fought against dowry and for a change in the rape law; they protested against the negative portrayal of women in the media; they intervened on government policies and programmes; they studied the status of women in India, made recommendations, signed petitions, passed resolutions, and moved the courts on the issue of gender justice.

II

Women Who Dared is a modest but sincere endeavour, a recognition of the contribution that a few representative women have made to social and cultural change in our country over the last 50 years; and an attempt at presenting their accounts not only in their own words, but in a social and political context. Their work, their lives and the role they have played in society intersecting, as it were, with the political, economic, social and cultural life of India. Through their brief, cameo autobiographies we hope readers will get a glimpse of the nation's own ever-evolving biography as it is reflected in the lives of women. These 21 women are both empowered and empowering. But what impelled them? How did they make the choices that they did? What inspired them to challenge, to innovate, to resist, to persevere, to excel, to fight for change—to somehow make a difference? Not only to their own lives, but to the lives of many others through their social or political engagement, through their art, and through their indomitable spirit. In their sometimes candid, sometimes guarded, but always fascinating recall we see a kaleidoscopic picture, spanning geography and history; a pentimento, individual stories layered over with collective histories; collectivities inspired by the vision and conviction of individuals. Small beginnings—with street-vendors, rag-pickers, peasant farmers, landless labourers or dalits—assuming huge proportions as they snowball towards change. The gesture, the word, the movement, the brushstroke, the frame—altering, definitely modifying our perceptions of dance, theatre, painting, sculpture, music, books, and film. The exhilaration and adventure of sport and travel; the transformative potential of research and teaching when it is

informed by ideology. Lone women challenging the might of the state, overturning the letter of the law. This is not to give undue importance to individual women—indeed, many in this collection would reject such a valorisation—rather to highlight the dynamic interaction between *them* and other groups and communities working for change.

Some very positive change has taken place as a result— in the last ten years women's literacy has gone up by 15 per cent; 33 per cent of panchayat seats are now reserved for women and this is a major step towards political empowerment; Education for Women's Equality, the Total Literacy Campaign and the Women's Development Programme (in Rajasthan) have made an enormous difference, especially to poor women; laws prohibiting dowry and special measures to deal with domestic violence have brought this widespread practice to public, police and judicial attention.

III

But there are many women who are not here, many whom we don't know about, many still invisible. Many who have already written their lives, or whose lives others have biographed; many whom we could not reach; many who should have been here—like Medha Patkar and P.T. Usha and Aparna Sen and Diane Edulji, for example—but are not because, although we tried very hard to record them, we were just not able to. There are those who would have been included if they were still alive to tell their stories; and there are two groups of women, writers and politicians, who are not present because they deserve volumes of their own. These are the obvious gaps, but there will be other disappointments, areas that have not been covered despite our best efforts—crafts and business, for instance—and the professions—to which women have made an enormous contribution, but usually anonymously. To this we can only say with complete sincerity that we tried our best, but for a country as diverse and vast as ours, and an enterprise as ambitious as this, a single volume would never be enough. There should be at least a dozen!

Finally, why record these lives at all, why single out the few? Partly, as mentioned earlier, to recognise and acknowledge the importance of their work; but as importantly, to make a small effort towards building an archive of women so that they are not lost to history. Women who, in their diverse ways, have not only left a mark of their own, -but in some significant way represent the struggles and aspirations of the larger community of women; who helped to transform by transgressing the norms; who excelled in the

face of tremendous odds; who fought back and fought with; whose varied experiences and backgrounds and accomplishments make this a polyphonic text. And, in the end, to salute those women who, like their predecessors a hundred years ago, dared to be different.

I'm delighted that the NBT has itself been a pioneer in building this archive, and hope that this volume will be followed by many others.

RITU MENON

Sheila Sandhu (b. 1924) is a legendary figure in Hindi publishing. One of the first women in the country to head a publishing house, she was also the first—and for a long time, the only—woman member of the Federation of Indian Publishers. She was a co-founder of **Mainstream** and Managing Director of **Rajkamal Prakashan**, a fine literary press established by Aruna Asaf Ali. She is the founder trustee of the I.C. Trust which identifies those individuals or institutions that fall outside the NGO net, for welfare aid; they could be villages in cyclone or earthquake-hit areas that have not been reached by other agencies; or a medical relief organisation; even barefoot teachers without institutional support.



Crossroads after Crossroads after Crossroads.

SHEILA SANDHU

In 1940, with the supreme assurance of anyone who is sixteen, I thought I had fully understood my very ordinary circumstances and become the sort of person that I would remain for the rest of my life. My world was defined by my ethical, painfully plain-looking father, Professor Rajinder Singh, and his very beautiful and flighty wife, Ajit Kaur. Their austere Gandhian household

filled with my four younger siblings. I knew my place as the eldest in a home with barely enough for everyone. I could recite *Gurbani*, spin the *charkha*, wore white *khadi* and rode fifteen minutes on my cycle to The Government School for Girls, only to be awarded mediocre marks that were a source of persistent disappointment to my father. That cycle ride used to be the nicest part of my day. I enjoyed the feel of the crisp sun of Lahore's famed winter on my face, and heard only the wind trapped in my hair and dupatta. My father hardly ever spoke about his grandfather, Ghuda Singh, a preacher at a *gurudwara* in Talwandi and his father, Chatur Singh, headmaster of The Mission School for Girls in Gujranwala. He stayed with this minor erudite tradition and, under the influence of the rift between Gandhian and Akali politics, was forced to resign, moved to Lahore and, along with five or six others helped found the The Sikh National College. A singularly unambitious man, he was liberal with an undercurrent of asceticism, secular and undogmatic as perhaps only the deeply religious can be. Astronomy, poetry and music could be an alternative to religion for him. He invited Kabir, Ghalib, Nanak, Tagore and Iqbal into our home and introduced them to me. Perhaps this laid the ground for my life-long romance with words and prepared me for my role as an understudy to wordsmiths in the future!

When Gandhiji announced a campaign against untouchability, Bhopaji requested Bacchana to cook *rotis* for the evening meal in our kitchen. His wife suffered this in silence, but when he adopted swadeshi, she could hardly endure the remains of her smouldering clothes — a heap of ash lying in her small, cold *vera*. Dark clouds of the deep incompatibility between my parents gathered over my adolescence, tingeing it with foreboding. I had no inkling of the cataclysmic storm that was to tear apart this small household in Tagore Gardens. Through an unhappy and confused mist I knew only this much—that I was destined to protect my father, two younger sisters and brothers from the disastrous consequences of the imminent desertion, guilt-ridden return and the final, irrevocable departure of his wife who preferred to make a separate, perhaps less difficult life, for herself with his friend. Her new life did not include the six of us.

Bhopaji shared his intimate sorrow with me and I responded with uncritical devotion, I can now see his quite natural limitations but still find it difficult to fault him. My mother, I never forgave. I felt imprisoned by the thick curtain of unhappiness that fell around us after she left. In desperation, I wrote to the All India Students' Union and volunteered at a ration depot to help in the war effort. By 1946, I had already qualified the B.T.; stood first

in the university for my M.A. from Lahore College for Women and wrested from my father the right to be wooed by Hardev, an emaciated English literature graduate with empty pockets and a head full of revolution, romance and cricket. I had accidentally crashed my squeaky cycle into him in 1943—and when he helped me gather up my books and emotions, I could never have suspected that this was the man with whom I would spend the better part of over half a century! Later, he visited me in jail when I was arrested along with the young radicals of Preet Nagar— Navtej and Uma—for singing anti-British songs composed by Sheila Bhatia. Hardev had already joined the Communist Party at the age of nineteen, dropped out of college and home three years after his westernised, civil engineer father died. Biji, his forty-two year old widowed mother lived in reduced circumstances with four children in the now impoverished splendour of 81-G Model Town,

My father knew of my half-hearted political activity, but his real objection was to the “unhealthy-looking communist for whom ends justify the means”. I somehow conveyed to Bhapaji that I could no longer “see” any more prospective grooms nor be inspected by their families. I held out till my younger sister was married; when this wore down his resistance we were wed, despite his political, ethical and emotional reservations about an unsuitable boy—in his eyes, a most disreputable suitor for anybody’s daughter. On August 3, 1947, I lowered my head, completed the *Anand Kara* and, without a backward glance, left my home forever.

In the blinding glare of noon, the delicate trellis of streets and galis of Lahore began to reverberate with terrifying, never-heard-before roars from the atavistic belly of prehistoric monsters that now stalked it— *Hurr-Hurr-Mahaaaa-Dev!*— *Allaaaa-Hooo-Akbar!*— *BolaySonay-Haaaal!* My heart shrank with fright. Every day the radio crackled ominously with news about Hindu-Muslim violence, conflict even between Sikhs and Muslims. There was talk of Independence, the partition of our beloved Lahore. My father, who could not hurt a fly, was charged with inciting communal passion, arrested along with many others and locked away in Lahore Central Jail. On the 19th, oblivious to dangers lurking in the bylanes of Lahore, Hardev and I took a tonga to meet him and to collect house keys and instructions about the children. He looked tired and sad.

The party office on McLeod Road was clogged with people and rumour. We stayed that night at the home of Frank Thakurdas in F.C. College as he opened up his arms and household to the beleaguered, but his wife was already at her wits end with all the chaos and disruption. The next morning we

moved to Khalsa College with Dr Amrik Singh. In such times, the status of prisoners and undertrials was precarious to say the least. One day they were proven guilty, the next day they were heroes, convicted, to be released... Confusion and chaos reigned. A pall of strange lethargy and apprehension hung over the courts.

Everything was uncertain. We crossed the border to Amritsar in a military truck along with foul agricultural produce in the quietness of the afternoon of the 23rd. Crowded amongst comrades in the melee at the party office, I felt safe and happy as if on a brief holiday. Like hundreds of others caught unawares, I had left the keys to my father's unhappy home with loving Muslim neighbours. I felt like returning again and again to try and salvage something of the life we had spent there, but more and more, felt a growing dread that this madness may never pass.

Three days later, on a turbid afternoon that terrible, terrible year, when we returned "home" we were told that some prisoners had been acquitted and released and that "some violence" had occurred. No one had any news... We rushed blindfold into a maelstrom and were swept into a vortex where all hell had broken loose. When I found my bearings I was told that my father, like others with him, had been acquitted, released on an unscheduled day and hacked to death in Lahore on the steps outside the courtroom in "a riot-like situation".

Much later, in November 1948, I made one last journey out of Lahore with Randhir Singh and Dr. Inderjit Singh. I was on a sentimental mission to rescue a bugtian—a modest ornament abandoned but safe in my father's bank locker, bequeathed to me by my grandmother. For the last time, I looked sorrowfully at the house of my childhood while Kulsoom Bano, the nubile, ninth bride of our neighbour pleaded in a frightened and ashamed voice never to return again. She could no longer vouch for the conduct of the male members of her household. It was a hopeless, wasted, dangerous journey and had yielded nothing. Madness brimmed over in the trains, in the refugee camps, in the city and the countryside.

Within twenty days of being wed, I inherited all my mothers' children. No one knew about Ajit Kaur's whereabouts and no one spoke of her anymore. I heard from her again only 45 years later when she was dying, but I never saw her again.

Along with a gaggle of our brothers and sisters in every shape and size, Hardev and I were protected, adopted and given sanctuary by the extended family at the Party Headquarters - all drift and in flux. Hardev, a “whole-timer” working towards revolution, was fed, clothed and paid a princely sum of twenty-five rupees a month, his income for the next dozen or more years. In those difficult times, it was impossible to expect the PHQ to endlessly house and feed the families of migrating comrades. Everyone’s story of horror and loss was unique. While cycling through Rainak Bazaar in Jalandhar, Hardev heard the horrible news and rushed to tell us at the Party Office. I grieved for Gandhiji like I hadn’t for my young father. The cauldron on the boil in my chest stilled suddenly. I now had a huge hole in my heart that could never be filled. I was the only employable person and it was decided that I must apply for a job as soon as possible. I never believed I was capable of any job! I was twenty-three— frightened, timid, overwhelmed, confused and desperate when I needed to be confident, courageous and determined. I hid away the real Bibi Sushil Kaur far away, even from myself, to haul myself out of the surrounding mayhem and escape the insanity that threatened us. G. C. Chatterjee, Director of Education, Punjab, had heard of my father and asked me to apply for my first job. Was it really me who was appointed to a lecturer’s post at the Government College for Girls in Ludhiana? Could there be anybody wanting to learn geography from me when the world around us was in shreds?

Anyhow, there was much relief at the prospect of a regular monthly income of Rs.210! I persuaded Hardev to mend bridges with his mother and to do his duty by two brothers who moved in with us. How this salary fed and clothed the eight adults who depended on it, I do not know. Maybe now I could recover from the sight of infants wrenched from wailing mothers and flung from trains into the dead of night, forget the sorrow of the young woman whom I “helped” deliver” a dead son on an unnamed railway platform. I quickly rationalized my own miscarriage at the Kalkaji Refugee Camp as inevitable, perhaps for the better. I remembered it only much later in April 1950, when a *dai* helped me to successfully deliver a pretty daughter at home in Ludhiana. Naturally, we named her Zoya after the martyred Bolshevik heroine!

In 1949 the fledgling government under Nehru had banned the Communist Party for its line of “*jhooti azadi*”. All of us sang along in tune and with gusto “...*badal gay a hai tala, par badli nahi hai chabi!*.” Hardev was forced to go underground, cast off his untidy turban, shave his unkempt beard and be reincarnated as Mohan. He was in hiding and on the run. His

wife, like many others, was tailed by the C.I.D. and her government job was in jeopardy. But it was all worth it because revolution was imminent, wasn't it? Wasn't the General Strike going to paralyze this bourgeois government and bring Capitalism down like a house of cards? We waited with bated breath. Jails filled with comrades as the revolution let them down. But Mohan remained at large, living by his wits. He remained underground for four years with his wicked sense of humour intact even as I lost the job for being the wife of a communist.

In response to an advertisement placed in the newspapers by *the* UPSC, I applied to and was selected for a gazetted job at Delhi University. I was appointed to teach geography to students at the Central Institute of Education. In the winter of 1950 we rented a tiny barrack close by in Timarpur at thirty rupees a month. A small tenement that was quick to fill with friends, comrades, relatives and fractured lives. It held an entire world, a vast universe of unfulfilled dreams and desires.

Hardev cycled everyday to the Party Office on faraway Ferozeshah Road. I walked to college. Alongside teaching at the Central Institute of Education, I was encouraged by its avuncular principal, Dr. Basu, to enrol as a student of M. Ed. and surprised myself by standing first again. This time at Delhi University, miles away from Lahore. Hardev was thrilled, echoing my dead father's joy. Despite standing first in Delhi University, nothing could save my job there because of an adverse report filed by the C.I.D. with the Home Ministry! Dr. Basu was scandalized that I could be reverted to the Punjab Education Department. I knocked in vain at several political doors, even met the Vice-President, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, to appeal against the injustice. With a twinkle in his eyes he asked me good-humouredly if my chest was ablaze with the fire of revolution! I prevaricated and asserted that I was a fine enough teacher of geography. He listened with sympathy, directed me to the Home Minister but added, "Dr. Katju is deaf. He won't understand your innocence!"

I was thirty when I lost my job at Delhi University, was reverted to Punjab and deliberately posted to the Government College for Women in Simla. I lived in the Hostel for Single Women and supplemented my salary by writing a geography textbook in English for Classes 6, 7 & 8 published by Govardhan Kapur & Sons, Amritsar. I never learnt how many copies were ever printed or sold. I recall a contract of sorts, a lump sum of money a couple of times, but where it all went in those dreary days I can't remember. Anything was more than I expected and less than what we needed. Then as

now, the money in textbooks was good, authors were exploited and publishers were not angels!

In 1954 the Party asked some whole-timers to look elsewhere for employment because it “couldn’t afford them”. I felt this was only a ploy to get rid of an inconvenient dissenter who was persistently vocal in party forums. The Delhi unit of the Party told Hardev that they had no work for him and that he could, if he liked, look for employment. The Party was trying to sack someone who did not even have a job — the humour of it did not escape him.

As always, Hardev put all his intelligence and boundless energy into whatever was now required of him—he was sometimes a journalist, at other times earning commissions as an insurance or travel agent. In 1955 we moved to a rented two-bedroom, ground floor house in suburban Jor Bagh that even boasted of a garden. It was miles away from my workplace, our friends and the world we had known so far. Hardev began to work late and couldn’t sleep without tablets. He brought home so much commission from Mercury Travels that soon afterwards he decided to set out on his own. Instinctively cautious, I tried to prevent him. But would he listen? The last time he had heeded anyone was his father who died when Hardev was sixteen.

I couldn’t imagine that just a decade after Lahore averted its face from me, I would have cut my hair and learnt to drive a car. Now nearing eighty, I can gasp at the sheer audacity of such a reinvention!

III

On *Janamasthami* in 1958, to Biji’s utter delight, ten-pound Titu was born in the modest clinic of Dr. Worsley in a small house in Daryaganj. I was registered with the Indian School for International Studies for a PhD on “The Impact of Western Education in China.” Zoya joined school next door to Sapru House and Tani went to Bluebells, founded in our neighbourhood by a Hungarian Jew, Marie Guha, a close friend and fellow traveller. I was thirty-four and our life was full of fellow students—Sumitra, Lila, Karki, Parvati, Yudhishter, Janak, Sita, the Takulias and the Phadnises became family. We remained in touch long after we became grandparents, but Hardev’s business associates hardly ever came home.

Friends rallied around when I needed to research at The Imperial Library in Tokyo and at Peking University. Comrade Joya volunteered to move in to help with our grown brood of a 6-month old and the girls, now all of three

and eight. Syqti and Chetram, a couple from Kangra, took over the running of the house as I prepared to leave for China. How I expected Joya and Hardev to manage Titu, Tani and Zoya for the year of my absence, I cannot imagine and can scarcely recall. I learnt to read and write Chinese and enjoyed the university at Peking, but my heart yearned for Hardev, the children and India. I have tiny, shiny pictures of adorable Chinese children in my arms. That is all that remains of the time spent there.

Long before diplomatic relations soured between India and China, it was evident to Indians everywhere in China that *Hindi-Cheeni-Bhai-Bhai* no longer rang true. My supervisor called me aside kindly and told me he had reason to believe that no Indian students would be allowed access to the library and that I should think of alternative ways of doing my work. I simply didn't believe this but quickened my fieldwork, filling in hundreds of neatly catalogued cards arranged in shoeboxes. Pretty soon after this conversation, most Indian students began simultaneously to share a peculiar experience—Chinese friends began to shun us, the books we needed disappeared suddenly, the administration was now unable to understand our accents, supervisors didn't have time anymore, the cafeteria and hostel staff simply shook their heads impassively.

When I returned to India and spoke of the mess in China, no one I knew believed me. Many of our friends, even Hardev, were embarrassed by my stories. Unlike some who said that I was embittered, frustrated because I had been unable to complete my doctorate, Comrade Joshi sensed that there was more than an unfortunate experience at the heart of my tale. When the Party split, it was another partition for us. Knives were out again, with brother turning once again on brother. I was thankful that Hardev stayed with the CPI. Those who stayed with the Party or in organizations such as AIPSO, NFIW, AITUC or IPTA continued to be somewhat protected in this new, ugly world. But the relationship between the Party and people like Hardev was muddled with a strange, mutually instrumentalist attitude. After my experience in China, when Hungary happened I did not renew my card, and by Czechoslovakia was decidedly renegade. Distance grew between Hardev's position and mine because he chose to remain loyal to this dream till the bitter end.

There were many like me who shared this ambivalent relationship with the Party, on the edge always. They were heir to all the disadvantages of being a flag-bearer—for the rest of the world to see they were "communists" but were never acknowledged by their own. Much of the group that set out to publish *Mainstream* was like this. By 1962, my dreams of doing a

doctorate were over and I was working with them. I did not know then that this was an apprenticeship crucial for what lay in store for me.

Hardev had developed the Midas touch and perfected it by now—a Fiat replaced the Landmaster, the painted icebox made room for a sparkling white Fridgidaire and the leaky Gulmarg cooler was wheeled out as air conditioners ate up our windows. I was catapulted into the wilds of South Delhi where we knew no one. He built a double-storied house with a large basement and garden — modern but mimicking the solidity and grandeur of the house his father had built in Lahore. It was all too grandiose. I already knew from experience that nothing ever lasted. The more money we had, the more worried I got. The more Hardev assured me, the more insecure I felt. Niggling doubts about where our life was going began to surface and a sediment of guilt settled in. Old cracks seemed to appear in the new house we built far away from the world that belonged to us. Snide remarks in party circles—tasteless, malicious and worse—made in bad faith, caused me much grief. I felt defensive and ostracized. I permed and dyed my hair an uncompromising black and wore my efficiency like impenetrable armour. An icy fist of anger enclosed my heart.

The export company Hardev set up with other ex-comrades rose to be one of the largest trading houses, and one day he returned after meeting Aruna Asaf Ali with the news that she was having trouble in her publishing house and that he had promised help. Before I knew it, Hardev had bought majority shares in Rajkamal Prakashan from Arunaji, and very quickly was in deep conflict with a managing director who owned a fistful of shares and appeared to be a good enough man with ambitions of his own and a reputation with authors whom we did not know or particularly care about then.

Since some shares were also bought notionally in my name, I was required to attend board meetings. These were stormy and intolerable. For the first time in my life, I watched Hardev flounder—he really had bitten off more than we could chew. A couple of months passed. On one occasion when the MD threatened to quit one more time in order to twist Hardev’s arm, I handed him a piece of blank paper and asked for a written resignation. Arunaji was appalled and Hardev was shocked. There was shouting and counter-shouting. Hardev yelled, “What are you doing, Sheila? Who will run this place? You can’t even read Hindi...” He was prepared to humour him, ask him to reconsider his resignation, but I would have none of this. The sheer unfairness of the situation caused my fit of outrage and foolhardiness.

He left with some staff, a few authors, a great deal of heartburn and set up his own imprint. The die had been cast.

Every day there was unprecedented tension in the family as I began to work a twelve-hour day in an office that published in a language I did not know, in a script I could hardly even read. As I crossed forty-five, I began to familiarize myself with the *Devnagari* script and tutored my eye to not instinctively see the *Devnagari* ‘m’ as the Gurmukhi V. What *had* I got myself into?

IV

As I put forward a tentative toe into this hitherto unknown world of *HindiwaHas*, they instantaneously dismissed me—perhaps as a “fast and bold”, “par-kati” Panjaabi with not a whiff of an idea about literature. I knew that my hair was short, that my husband was de facto owner of this publishing house, and that from a particular point of view I might have looked threatening and taiz, but I found their facile assumption that I was uncultured, offensive and infuriating. They watched me with contempt laced with bewilderment. I reciprocated with bewilderment laced with contempt. Stranger cultural bedfellows must never before have been forced to cohabit. Would I never be forgiven for not belonging to the cow belt? I angrily felt that I could tell these *paan-chewers* with alien names a thing or two about the world. After all, I was reasonably well-read, widely travelled, a highly educated woman. Nobody in the world I came from could spit at this with such precision and practiced ease.

I began to read short stories which seemed familiar and accessible. *Nai Kahaniyan* was my introduction to the complicated world of Hindi literature. I groped my way in the dark and made my way backwards from there. I did not know the language, its authors or their social conventions, and could not even guess what was expected of me—how to behave with the stalwarts or with aspiring writers of a language I could not read, write and hardly spoke. Mercifully, even in this fractious atmosphere, there were wise saints like *Dwivedi* who put his hand on my head and spoke to the Bibi Sushil Kaur who cowered inside me—a debt I have never been able to repay. Some friends at the People’s Publishing House, the Progressive Writers’ Union, Urdu poets and Punjabi short story writers helped keep my chin up. At this crucial point, the role of advisor played by the young *Namwar Singh*, charismatic speaker and teacher, was as indispensable for Rajkamal as it was

for me, but at once brought with it the problem of factional, personalized literary politics.

Old associates of Rajkamal alleged that it would soon come to smell just like another People's Publishing House. Our old comrades declared that the Sandhus were expanding their empire! Both were certain that Rajkamal would collapse. I shut my ears to all this, kept my eyes open and started with what I was good at—administration. I put procedures into place, systematized production and began to meet authors who were not openly hostile. Rajkamal printed all its books at Navin Press which it owned. There was already trouble between the management and labour. The last thing I had anticipated was having to suffer the ignominy of a demonstration outside my home shouting "*Hai! Hai! Randi ho gai, Sheila Sandhu, Murdabad!*" It was my world turned upside down. In panic, I blamed Hardev for landing us in this soup and begged him to sell off Navin Press the next day, if possible. Hardev blamed me for being obstinate and impetuous in forcing the resignation of people better equipped to handle such situations. I felt besieged, with nowhere to run. Only Comrade Joshi remained kind and said, "Your political and cultural instincts are healthy. Just follow them and carry on your honest work."

I travelled to places that felt farther away than China and as strange—Banaras, Lucknow, Allahabad and Patna. When I met authors, I confessed my inexperience of running any business, indeed, even of Hindi, and told them that if I could master Chinese I would very quickly learn Hindi! I assured them of clean, transparent transactions and my commitment to carry forward the tradition of the Rajkamal imprint. I asked for only time to prove my intentions. I met legendary writers to reassure them that I was not there to close down Rajkamal and open a more lucrative motor parts shop! I had the honour of meeting, and the good fortune of getting to know, many senior authors—*Pantji, Blwgioatibabu, Bachchanji, Niralaji, Sumanji, Baba Nagarjun* and *Phaneshwar Nath Renu*. I met with *Mahadeviji* and *Dinkarji*. I carried forward the established reputation of Rajkamal without falling prey to the temptation of pocket book romances and thrillers, or into the allegedly more edifying textbook publishing— from which both enormous print-runs and huge profits accrue. I never strayed from punctual, persistent production of high-quality-literature, nor did I "diversify" into the more lucrative English publishing. Over the years, I began to be forgiven for being who I was!

Trust gradually grew between the younger writers, closer to me in age. I discovered that it was possible to find friends from their midst. *Rajinder*

Singh Bedi, Ashk, Nemiji, Bhisham, Bharat Bhushan Aggarwal, Nirmala, Suresh Aivasthi, Sarveshivar, Nirmal, Kunwar Narain, Prayag, Raghuvir Sahay, Liladhar Jagodi, Manohar Shyam Joshi, Abdul Bismillah and last but not least, the irrepressible *Shrilal Shukla*. I remember taking a tonga with *Namwarji* to the Hari Masjid in the shadow of Parliament House to be witness at the nikah of *Rahi Masoom Raza*! Like a signpost at a crossroad, I found the greatest affinity with *Krishna Sobti* who writes in Hindi with the sensibility of Urdu and the impertinence that comes from being a Punjabi. I tried to understand, with less success, the younger, ever-energetic writers defying the subtle, even harmless, hierarchies familiar to our generation. Was this the dreaded “generation gap” stretching between me and writers like *Ashok Vajpeyi* and *Mrinal Pande*? I won their affection and that of still younger authors—*Satyen Kumar, Manzoor Ehtesham, Padma Sachdev, Sivadesh Deepak, Gitanjali, Pankaj Bisht* and many others. In her autobiography, *Diana Athill of Andre Deutsch* wrote that friendship between a writer and publisher is rare but not impossible. I was lucky to form lasting friendships that have weathered many a storm of love-hate that this relationship is heir to.

Our home began to fill once more with voices, poems, quarrels, songs, jokes and arguments. Not a month passed without a mushaira or celebration for yet another Sahitya Akademi Award — of which Rajkamal authors had over twenty odd to their credit. Excuses were no longer needed to meet. Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi began to rub shoulders with each other. In the beginning they sat together formally, ill at ease like distant cousins who have reason to mistrust the other. Then they began to speak, I daresay to even converse, if not enjoy the company and work of each other. Rajkamal was the first to publish annotated editions of Urdu poets from India, and *Faiz* from our very own Lahore in both the *Devnagari* and Urdu scripts—beautiful, strikingly different, sitting face-to-face and bound together as they should be. Personally, it was a great relief for us because Hardev could now participate in these evenings instead of periodically sneaking out of the living room for a snooze while everyone else was engrossed in a riveting account of the politicking within the *Nagari Pracharani Sabha*.

The RKP initiative to publish the collected works of stalwarts in the form of beautifully produced *granthavalis* was only a secular harking back to an old tradition of printing religious *pothis*. The emphasis was to archive writings of a living author who had made a significant contribution to the destiny of Hindi literature. The first was a tribute to the warmth and genius of *Hazari Prasad Dwivedi*. Edited by his son, Mukund, it was published

much later and released by V.P. Singh at a simple function in Lucknow. *Pant Rachnavali* was published first, for which I secured a pre-publication order and advance—an unheard of event in those days. The idea was a runaway success. Library purchase of these expensive volumes enabled me to jump production from one *granthavalli* to the next *Parsai*, *Muktibodh*, *Renu*, *Bachchanji* and for me, personally, the most significant, the collected works of *Saadat Hasan Manto*. When I retired, we were putting together *Isntat Chughtai's* writings.

RKP brought out a series of lower priced Selected Anthologies of Contemporary Writing. We were on a winning streak of ideas—a very heady time, indeed. *Nai Kahaniyan* had always belonged to Rajkamal. Many authors famous today published their first stories in this magazine. It is important to remember that I speak of a time that predates the magazine revolution of the Seventies, when little else existed in Hindi except *Dharamyug*, *Saptahik Hindustan*, *Hans*, *Dinman*, and perhaps, *Grilialakshimi*!

We continued to commission a series of translations of existential literature and Nobel laureates. Hindi readers could now have *Camus* priced at a low and affordable eight rupees. We never really managed to sustain a substantial list of titles in the social sciences, but here too we aimed for the best — if I'm not mistaken, Rajkamal was the first to translate into Hindi *Kosambi*, *Romila Thapar*, *Irfan Habib*, *Sumit Sarkar*, *R.S.Sharma* and many others. These were quickly snapped up by a Hindi readership starved of available work already published in English.

This time is as good as any to reiterate once more what I have always maintained — that my contribution, if any, to the world of Hindi publishing is limited to carrying forward a tradition of excellence and quality that had been structured into Rajkamal by its earlier owners, *Devraj* and *Om Prakash*. As Rajkamal expanded, *Devji* asked his brother, a cloth merchant in Amritsar, to close shop and move to Delhi. Om Prakash, farsighted, creative and unafraid of adventure, set up many series and gave the Rajkamal imprint the character of uncompromising quality that is associated with it even today, despite the corners that are now cut. I never strayed from the path set by him, only adding to it as and when necessary. Unfortunately, he was the man in charge and in conflict with Arunaji over the use of American PL-480 funds when Hardev strayed into the picture.

I regret that I was able to publish only one title of *Mohan Rakesh* who became a friend but was loyal to an older friendship, or *Vatsayayanji* who kept an ideological distance from some equally ideological *salahkaars*

associated with Rajkamal. (It is not for me to say that there are authors who would not have been published but for my presence in Rajkamal, and perhaps that there may be more than even I know). I cannot say that I felt anything but glee on heaping scorn at feelers sent to Rajkamal to publish *Neelkamal* and *Kati Patang*. Younger filmmakers came often to Rajkamal, hauling away bagsful — *Raag Darbari*, *Mitro Marjani*, *Tamas*, *Netaji Kahin* and many others.

The left parties have always had a curious relationship with intellectuals. They adopt some of the finest and hold them in a vice-like grip that renders them unable to communicate with any but the already converted. They have been known to promote thoroughbred mediocrity for flimsy, irrelevant, far from laudable reasons that are rank careerism and self-interest in another guise. Perhaps I too can be faulted for such oversights. For sure, the left never understood the battle *Arunaji* wanted to wage on their behalf, or indeed the one I fought. Their view of the political—and indeed what constitutes politics—in the world of literature and the arts is heartbreakingly jaundiced. I wonder how the left now treats publishers of progressive literature, or indeed, if these publishers themselves are able to resist inflicting wounds that they are sure to have suffered at the hands of established parties on the left. Do they continue to push away rather than embrace friends? Would things have been different had Comrade Joshi's less puritanical, more pluralist, line prevailed?

Anyhow, Rajkamal's strength remained its unfailing and unwavering commitment to literature and literary criticism of worth. Its journal of literary criticism, *Alochana*, was published intermittently for nearly 40 years, no mean achievement given the combined vagaries of its editors, contributors and the publisher! I hear that it has recently been resuscitated again. *Alochana Pustak Parivar* was a halfway successful attempt to imitate book club traditions of other languages. Habits of the Hindi readers were remarkably different from the Bengali, Marathi or Malayalam reader. We gave members a 35% discount on pre-publication orders of books advertised in the monthly in-house magazine, *Prakashan Samaachar*. This included our hardcover list, offered to readers in a paperback binding. It required tedious billing and mailing small Value Paid Packets ordered from deep inside rural Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and U.P. It meant handling obdurate postal and railway clerks. Every time we were fed up and thought of discontinuing the scheme for being utterly cumbersome, we recalled letters of thanks by countless readers. *Ramgopalji* managed the nitty gritty of correspondence and dispatch and resisted any move to shut it down. At its

height, the membership reached over a thousand households. *APP* was one of the first casualties of the new management. It was never meant to be profitable—just an unwieldy and messy service that Rajkamal was committed to provide.

Touts, hand in glove with hustlers, seemed to crawl out of the woodwork whenever large orders were placed by governments anywhere, and money was to be made hand over fist! During the so-called Operation Blackboard launched by the Rajiv Gandhi government, I remember being propositioned for a deal in which a mere “understanding” would have brought a windfall for Rajkamal— money as payment for delivery of books that needn’t be printed, for students who did not exist, in schools that were not built. I was enraged, rang the bell for mild-mannered *Kantiji* and asked the man sitting across my table to be removed from the premises of Rajkamal. Confused and nonplussed, the fellow rose. Hastily rearranging his demeanor and dhoti, he spluttered, “...*Aap kahay ko itni pare-saan ho rahi hain, Seelajee?..aap kuch theek samaj nahi pa raheen hain..kahain, to hum Sutt-pur-kaas-jee sey mil lain?.. .Rajkamal jaisee varisht sanstha ko human zaroorat hai hi nahi, to phir hum aur kahin jaten hain...*” As he left, he did not forget to spit outside my door. I made an appointment with the prime minister to apprise him of these machinations unfolding under his schemes. He smiled sweetly and ineffectually, as he did at everything.

With a Luddite passion and deep suspicion, I resisted ballpoint pens, digital watches, food and word processors, trying to resist a modernity that would substitute Gestetner cyclostyle for the Xerox, the clatter and tinkle that sang out of the bilingual keyboard of the Remington typewriter (as if writing could be electronic, without being manual at all!) with the deathly silence of computers. We continued to accept and store hand-written manuscripts that Ajitaji painstakingly typed out, this was set to proofs in letterpress and then approved by authors who were consulted about the blurb, publicity and cover of their books. Even when we were unable to consult the author on every aspect of production, I never discouraged them from participating in the production of their books. At meetings of the Federation of Indian Publishers, of which, for a considerable time, I was its first and sole woman member, I tried in vain to show that greater trust with authors could be built by making their royalty accounts transparent. Understandably, this was not hugely popular at a forum of publishers!

We produced books that were far from electronic. They remained books and were not stored in disks but in reams of paper along miles of shelves in rented godowns. This required six-monthly stocktaking, preparing “*kucchi*”

lists and regular pest control to prevent mice from eating the “*lai*” in the spine. This may now sound quaint and comic, but when this complicated operation was underway Mishraji would emerge from the godowns, sneezing and coughing, covered in dust like a hapless victim of an earthquake. The staid, ever stable Sattji had an unflappable, stolid presence that smoothed over frictions in an office with a staff of over thirty people. Mohan Gupta, who came from Calcutta, increasingly took over editing and rose to be the best editor-cum-production manager Hindi publishing has seen. He could be faulted for everything but lack of enthusiasm, working hard beyond the call of duty. David-like he was forever locked in battle with dragons from the Sales Department who habitually greeted every editorial initiative with declarations that it was utterly unsaleable, nothing but “*pathar ka achaar*” pickled stone in bottles!

My greatest regret remains that the middle class of north India is unable to access or cherish the literary wealth of Hindi. My three children were no different, and remain unconscious of the yawning gap this leaves in their intellectual and emotional life. For one reason or another none of them chose to share my feelings for Hindi. We pressurized our second daughter, just back in Delhi, to stop her unending pursuit of her husband and yet another degree, and look towards a career like any self-respecting woman should. Even as a child she had an irreverent, always direct and opinionated manner, hard enough for me to swallow, and very quickly I realized that, given our very different temperaments and the politics of managing the office in Daryaganj, the situation was fraught with unspeakable potential for conflict. The one thing I did not want was the boat to be rocked. She concentrated on learning the ropes in the new paperback division and, with great enthusiasm, took up the task of doing the covers for the RKP Paperbacks, modelled on the hugely popular Penguin Classics. She brought to the world of Hindi book production works of established contemporary artists— *M.F. Hussain, Ram Kumar, Swaminathan, Akbar Padamsee, Tyeb Mehta, F.N. Souza, Krishen Khanna*, and some of India’s best young artists who were still relatively unknown — *Manjit, Arpita, Ghulam, Jogen, Nilima, Shamshad, Paramjit, Amitav, Vivan* and *Mrinalini*.

My years with Rajkamal were greatly enriching, and personally rewarding, and rectified the flaws in my education. I look back at my thirty years there with satisfaction and happiness—with scarcely any regrets. I would probably replicate them were I to relive them. What initially had been hurdles in the hidebound tradition of Hindi — being a woman in a male

domain, modern and westernized — somewhere along the road yielded advantages of being unique, a curiosity.

As told to and written by Tani S. Bhargava

Vina Mazumdar (b. 1927) is a pioneer in the women's studies movement in India, and one of the leading lights of the women's movement. As Member Secretary of the government's Committee on the Status of Women in India, she was responsible for producing the seminal report, *Towards Equality* (1975) on the status of women in India. She is a founder member of the Indian Association of Women's Studies, and of the Centre for Women's Development Studies (Delhi). She has also been Director, Women's Studies, Indian Council of Social Science Research. Vina Mazumdar has campaigned and lobbied tirelessly with state and central governments on behalf of all women, but especially poor and peasant women in India; and on behalf of women's studies. She has written and published widely on women in India, and been recognised for her contribution to both, not only by the women's movement but by Unifem, YWCA and the Association of Women in International Development.



Pages from the Diary of a Rolling Stone

VINA MAZUMDAR

The publisher and editor wanted me to write an “essay on those aspects of (my) work and life that represent (my) particular field of activities, and (my) own position in it; and the socio-historical context and struggles to highlight achievements with reference to that context.” Unfortunately, it is difficult to define any of these. My passport describes me as a social scientist, but very few today remember me as one. I have become a “women's activist”; a “feminist”; a “trouble-maker”; a “gender specialist” in undefined areas;

personally, I prefer “recorder and chronicler of the Indian women’s movement”; and “grandmother of women’s studies in South Asia.”

I was a teacher of political science with an abiding interest in educational reform, for which I abandoned my chosen vocation to become a bureaucrat, combining the administration of grants with planning the reform of education and its institutional mores. Though I seldom fail to cite the late Prof. D.S. Kothari and Prof. J.P. Naik as my gurus, no one today thinks of me as an “educationist”. The Indian Association for Women’s Studies, which I helped to found, has been officially acknowledged as an educational organization, but the Centre for Women’s Development Studies of which I was founder-director, is still struggling for that recognition. The IAWS and the CWDS are not all-women bodies, but officialdom, the media and many others continue to identify them as “women’s organisations”.

My only sister, concerned about my future security, scolded me for “becoming a rolling stone—changing seven jobs in 14 years”—when at the age of 53, with an unbroken record of 30 years of service in government-funded public institutions—and three children who were still students—I started the CWDS with no guaranteed resource support. To her it was a gamble, for which I had no training. Fortunately, she lived long enough to see the gamble succeed.

The first 25 years (1927-52)

Born in Calcutta, in a middle class family, I have no memory of “struggle” during my childhood and adolescence. The security, affection and protection offered by a large extended family to its youngest members made for contented dependence on, not unhappiness with, the broad boundaries that defined my social existence. Varied individuals within the family—distinguishable by their outspoken differences, conversational styles and interests (theatre, music, poetry, sports, history, and of course, politics)—provided opportunities for an unobtrusive bookworm to listen, observe, register and remember the gist and highlights of such debates. Some members were particularly good storytellers—about their struggles and adventures in their young days. My uncle, a historian, helped me understand the part played by good students in the lives, responsibilities and social beliefs of three brothers from a large poverty-stricken family in rural East Bengal, which provided the rationale for unostentatious living and conferred a *value* on simplicity, home-tailored clothes and an emphasis on self-generated entertainment. The one exception was books. My mother’s

struggle to educate herself through reading was indulged by my father. She bought books and magazines from her household savings, enabling me to become a voracious reader long before I started school in 1935- Diocesan Girls' School had an educational philosophy, avoiding identification either with the Raj or with missions more interested in conversion. I followed my aunts and my sister. Without annual or half-yearly examinations, promotion depended on cumulative performance in class-work and weekly tests, prizes being awarded for subjects in which a student obtained 75 per cent at the end of the year. Teachers discouraged reproducing language from books, the emphasis being on comprehension. Disciplined behaviour was upheld, but initiatives taken by students to organize celebrations at the end of term were not discouraged.

School certainly shaped my “unconventional” behaviour with my students and colleagues, and earned me much-needed help, advice and loyalty from my junior staff in administration. The love of argument and discussion initiated in the family was further stimulated by the school.

By comparison, my experience of college education was quite different. The World War had unsettled our family's lives. A minor bombardment in Calcutta led to an evacuation of women and children. Calcutta University opened extra centres for the matriculation examination outside Bengal, to help evacuees. I appeared in Banaras, and started my college career in the Women's College, Banaras Hindu University. A major reason for this was my father's sudden decision to quit government service considerably in advance of his retirement date, because the irrigation department (of which he was chief engineer) was ordered to collaborate with the army to mine all the dams and embankments in East Bengal—in preparation for a “strategic retreat” before the advancing Japanese army. Instead he moved to Jamshedpur to take charge of a lagging water supply project, as a constructive rather than a destructive endeavour. My mother was on rapid transits between Banaras, Jamshedpur and Calcutta to cope with various family emergencies, especially the care and security of her grandchildren.

By the middle of 1944 the war situation changed and I could join Ashutosh College, Calcutta, for my B.A. (Hons.). My father returned to Calcutta for his finally retired existence, but his stars, (like mine half a century later) had not intended this man of action for a life of leisure. Before the year was out he was in Delhi, planning multi-dimensional river valley projects. My eldest brother resolved doubts about my fate by asserting that I should continue my studies in Calcutta, and take charge of “running the household to acquire some experience”, with an expression of absolute

confidence. “Khuku carries a cool head on her shoulders”. This statement bolstered my ego, and I enjoyed my first experience of life with virtually no supervision by elders.

College life in Banaras and Calcutta did not provide much stimulus for mental growth, but the accelerated pace of social and political change in the country and in Calcutta during the 1940s advanced my social and political education. My father’s decision to quit government service was followed by the Quit India Movement, the famine of 1943—and my mother’s drastic decision to impose changes in our lifestyle (no hoarding of food in the family, reserving milk and sugar only for the grandchildren, severe cuts in the adults’ tea and coffee, and replacement of service by servants at meals by self-service—to avoid leaving uneaten food on plates). Her logic influences me till today. “It hurts me to offer *uchchista* (half-eaten leftover food in the plate) to hungry people. I must be able to offer them clean food which does not destroy their dignity.”

Other political events followed: the Cripps Mission, the end of the War, the advent of a Labour government in U.K. with heightened expectations of independence. The INA (Indian National Army) trials, the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi and the AICC (All India Congress Committee) meeting in Calcutta provided plenty of opportunity for students to engage in political demonstrations, serving as volunteers at massive political meetings or providing medical / nursing services to victims of police firing. As secretary of the College Girls’ Students’ Union I shouldered some organisational responsibilities, and my teachers complained about my lack of preparation for my final examination in March 1946.

My mother had known for some time about my great desire to go to Oxford, and had begun talking to my father all through the months in Delhi when I was in Calcutta; she ultimately got him to promise that if I got a first in my B.A., he would consider the idea. When I missed it by four marks I had no face left to talk to him, and meekly got myself admitted into Delhi University for an M.A. Delhi was, in any case, the centre of extraordinary political activity. The interim government led by Jawaharlal Nehru had taken charge, the Constituent Assembly was in session, and the chance to occasionally sit in the visitors’ gallery, listening to leaders whom I had only heard or read about, was extremely exciting. It made up for the loss of dreams of Oxford and the culture shock that I experienced in Delhi University.

During my student years in Calcutta or Banaras I had never seen students wearing suits. Dhotis and pyjamas had of course given way to trousers

during the war, but girls continued to wear ordinary cotton saris and low-heeled chappals or sandals. I found students in Delhi University overdressed, in silk salwar-suits and high-heeled sandals. But the biggest shock was to discover that M.A. history students had never heard of Chaitanya) My command over Indian history was not great, but I found it stronger than that of the women students I met in St. Stephen's College. My father's agreement to let me sit for the entrance examinations to Oxford University came as an enormous relief, even though they involved learning French to pass the translation paper. My tutor in French, realising that I had to take the exam within six weeks, abandoned her initial plan of taking me through French grammar. Instead she gave me French poetry and essays (never given to beginners) to translate, banking on my command over English and my love for literature and poetry. By the fourth week I found myself translating La Martin's poems on the French Revolution into practically poetical English, and was admitted to St. Hugh's College on the basis of that first exam.

By this time the communal tension in Delhi was high and I knew my father worried about my journeys to and from the University, involving frequent tonga-rides through stretches of "sensitive areas". He welcomed my decision to abandon Delhi University (to prepare for my eventual journey and studies at Oxford) as "sensible".

Being in Delhi saved me from witnessing the horrors of the great Calcutta killings of 1946. Instead I was present in Delhi on the 14th and 15th of August 1947—at the historic midnight session and Jawaharlal's Tryst with Destiny speech, plus the next day's meeting in Parliament, witnessing the extraordinary demonstration of joy with which the people of Delhi welcomed the dawn of freedom. Fortunately again, we left for Calcutta immediately thereafter and were saved from witnessing the post-Partition riots that followed. Instead, my last Indian memory was of Mahatma Gandhi's extraordinary performance in stopping a renewed outbreak of communal frenzy on both sides of the eastern border.

All my self-confidence deserted me when I found myself on the platform at Paddington Station waiting for a train to Oxford. I was in a totally strange place with no one I knew, and had never travelled alone. But three years of the Oxford tutorial system knocked out any remaining fears from my mind. It was exhilarating to realise that I could think for myself, that I did not have to accept the printed word as gospel truth, and that tutors did not think it infra-dig to admit their ignorance when they could not answer my questions.

Betty Kemp, my College tutor was my first morale builder and taught me what the role of a teacher is. “My job is to teach an undergraduate how to teach herself.” Forty-one years later, presenting her with a copy of my case study on the National Council for Educational Research and Training, I wrote this sentence in my inscription. She marvelled that I had remembered her exact words!

On my return in 1950 I started thinking about a job, and couldn’t imagine what I would do if my father said it was against the family tradition. I was utterly unprepared for his positive response to my desire to teach. Seeing my surprise he explained that he was quite prepared for such a logical event. “But something else has happened. During the years that you have been away, the country has adopted a new Constitution which tells me that I cannot discriminate between you and your brothers. I had always told them that my responsibility is to equip them to stand on their own two feet afterwards. Now I must apply the same principle to you. Why do you look so surprised? Don’t you know that I have always been a law-abiding man? *“When the law changes I must adapt myself to its requirements”*. It would take me nearly 25 years to realise that very few Indian fathers, brothers or husbands share that kind of respect for law. In July 1951, I joined Patna University as a lecturer in Political Science to begin my chosen profession.

A year later, I married someone I met in Patna through my newly-acquired interest in classical music. Unlike me, he had been a rebel from his teens and had dropped out of college because his father forced him to read science, when he wanted to read arts. He had no degree, and our marriage created quite a stir in Patna as well as in family circles in Calcutta. We did however receive full blessings and acceptance from his widowed mother and both my parents. When I went to inform my head of department, Prof. V.K.N. Menon of my forthcoming marriage, he looked aghast and asked, “Does that mean that you are going to leave us?” When I said I had no such intention, he promptly called for a celebration within the department.

The next 25 years (1952-77)

Much later I learnt to refer to professional women in my generation as the first-generation beneficiaries of the equality clauses of the Constitution. Many elderly relatives warned me that I would not be welcomed in Patna because I was a woman, young and a Bengali. All their prophesies were wrong. Neither my students nor my colleagues made me feel unwelcome in all my 14 years at that university. Our department attracted many bright

students who were willing to accept my “unconventional” teaching methods, even when they knew that they would not necessarily help them to “do well” in their exams.

As a junior teacher I had no influence on curriculum or the examination system, but as the first secretary of the Patna University Teachers’ Association (1956), a group of us worked out a rational plan for organisation of teaching within the social sciences on a collaborative basis—to promote specialisation in research-based teaching, and interaction between different social science faculties and students. Some of us also became members of the Bihar Citizens’ Committee on Education and organised a series of seminars on ways to improve both school and university education. But my research plans had to be deferred because of the birth of two daughters and my mother-in-law’s terminal illness. Between 1956 and 1959 I lost my father, my mother-in-law and my mother. The Registrar called me and suggested that I avail of the leave sanctioned to me for research in Oxford by the Syndicate a year earlier, and get out of the country—because the State Government had marked me down as one of the “troublemakers”, and might decide to transfer me out of Patna. I had just laughed off my brother’s suggestion to finance my Oxford trip but the Registrar’s warning seemed serious, so I left for Oxford in September 1960 with my two daughters. The Principal of St. Hugh’s and Betty Kemp both advised against taking the children, but the departure of the two mothers left me with no option. I was reasonably sure that I would find enough friends to help in Oxford—which I did. Those two years proved tough—first to get back into the habit of putting in long hours of study in the library while the children were at school, and later to leave them with people in Oxford (where they would be adequately cared for while continuing their schooling) to pursue my research in London and Edinburgh.

After the first year, the RBI reduced my foreign exchange allowance by £200 because of changes in Exchange Control regulations. Unfortunately the delay in my return to Oxford disqualified me for the Fellowship that St. Hugh’s College had virtually assured me. The principal offered me a small grant towards my Edinburgh trip and got me some assistance from the Oxford Society—which made up half the shortfall that the RBI decision had created. I had to fend off an old tutor’s offer to transfer a legacy some old lady had left her to assist me, by promising that I would ask for her help if I needed it absolutely. I was not unused to managing life on a shoestring budget, and those two years at Oxford again bolstered my confidence in my management capacity, plus the realisation that the promise my early tutors

had seen had not perished during my years of teaching, with very little time to keep up with my studies. I finished my thesis the day the Sino-Indian war started and persuaded my research guide to arrange for a quick examination and viva so that I could leave by December.

The birth of two younger children increased my responsibilities—even with very willing assistance from my husband and older daughters. They were also having problems in their new school, having forgotten both Hindi and Bangla during the two years in UK, and very unhappy with the harshness and inadequate teaching by some of the teachers in the Convent, the only English-medium school in Patna. My appointment at the University Grants Commission (UGC) as Education Officer was therefore more than welcome, in spite of the difficulties that I knew it would pose. My vice-chancellor asked me why I wanted to take up a job which offered no increase in salary leaving teaching that I loved. I could only say that since the Education Commission was half-way through its reform exercise I wanted to have a hand in implementing any reforms that it might recommend. I was still a wide-eyed innocent in the interaction between educational reform and the politics of education.

Over the next five years, even though I lost much of that wide-eyed innocence, there was a lot of gain. Under D.S. Kothari's guidance in the UGC I learnt an enormous amount about the issues and roles of a nationally connected university system. The UGC also allowed me to undertake something of a "*Bharat darshan*". The Education Commission's Report and several discussions and activities taken up under DSK's inspiration and challenge, expanded my understanding about the dynamic relationship between democracy and education. Educational planning needs a long-term perspective and patience, and the Oxford model which I had enjoyed so much could not be applicable everywhere in India. Taking a Visiting Committee round the interior colleges of Rajasthan and some of the north-eastern states practically broke my heart—the appalling conditions in which students had to live, study and spend years of their life, those years which should have been a time of growth and stimulation. I broke down while presenting my findings to DSK. He found my use of a social science approach in examining these institutions to be a novel and valuable breakthrough, and promptly constituted a Standing Committee on Students Affairs, making me its secretary. All the members of that Committee were social scientists of eminence.

Excessive pressure of work left me very little time to attend to my children's needs. My husband's professional ambitions faced resistance in

Delhi of the '60. Life was therefore hard for all of us. An offer in 1970 of a two-year fellowship from the Indian Institute of Advanced Study at Shimla to work on education and social change came as a great relief. My eldest daughter had just joined college. The UGC gave me study leave, which enabled me to retain the government accommodation in Delhi for my husband and daughter, the Shimla Institute provided me with a very decent house and the welcome and stimulating company of other fellows (some of whom were old friends). The three children were admitted to a very famous old school in Shimla and I settled down to recover my physical and intellectual equilibrium.

My stars intervened again and I found myself back at university, teaching in Berhampur, Orissa, by the end of the year. As head of the department of political science in a new university with a very young faculty and a far smaller group of students, I could indulge in experiments to stimulate both faculty and students' involvement in reforming our curriculum and teaching methods, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration in seminars and research activities, and propagating seminal ideas about the special role of Indian universities contained in the Report of the Education Commission. The positive response from students and colleagues was encouraging, but the combination of family responsibilities and a summons from DSK to return to the UGC ended this interlude in May 1972. Shortly before my return I was informed by the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare (GOI) that I had been appointed a member of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI). By October 1973 I found myself member-secretary of the reconstituted CSWI, with a mandate to produce a report within one year.

This assignment was to radically alter the direction of my own and many others' lives. Our findings through pooling of available social science knowledge on varied sections of India's diverse communities/regions/class/traditions; and extensive discussion with over 10,000 women from different backgrounds in most states and cultural regions revealed *our own ignorance and shattered our self-image as social scientists/teachers/and as "daughters of Independence"*. A lasting outcome of this shared experience was the emergence of a *"collective conscience"*, as a steering group as well as a debating forum, which had to absorb the pain and shock of unexpected discoveries, to find a format and framework for their presentation, and to develop adequate mental and intellectual strength to make sense of the huge contradictions between the perceptions and beliefs of the educated intelligentsia—women as well as men—and what we were learning from the women of the soil. Reorganising official demographic data and other

statistics to explain the evidence of large-scale marginalisation, poverty and the invisibility of the majority of India's labouring women in such statistics was yet another major exercise, for which we had neither adequate skills nor a theoretical framework.

We met the deadline by working round the clock for the last six months, and our Report created a stir in the national and international media, a growing section within the UN, as well as among international scholars entering the women and development debate. But its impact on us, and on me personally, was of a different order. My *earlier struggle represented an individual woman's efforts to balance the demands of professional and familial responsibilities. This new struggle was increasingly a collective, ideological one to; rediscover the Indian nation, the world, the past, present and future, from the perspective of India's hidden and unacknowledged majority—poor working women in rural and urban areas.* As an academic and an educational planner, I too had contributed to this “intellectual purdah” that excluded the majority of Indian women's lives, labour, dignity and dreams from any public attention. The educational process—my great love and priority—had acquired an inimical demonic face, and our idealised democratic state (in which I had taken such pride) had, at best, to be held guilty of criminal neglect and at worst, of the oppression and exploitation of that vast majority. This shattering realisation, combined with a disruption in the family over the degree of freedom of convictions and action permissible to our adult daughters resulted in a voluntary separation from their father for nearly six years—to be ended by the same daughters when they brought him back as his health needed care and attention.

Provenance in the guise of Prof. J.P. Naik and the Indian Council of Social Science Research came to my rescue. After the CSWI's Report, instead of returning to the UGC I joined the ICSSR to organise follow-up action—publications and needed research on women—identified by the CSWI. Women's Studies in India was born under the shadow of the national Emergency which threatened most of the ideology and values of the freedom movement that I had observed through my life. Not having been a political activist in the formal sense, I knew nothing of strategies to counter the situation. Naik Sab, the Gandhian activist, however, was a past-master at this game. “The political implications of a sponsored research programme focusing on poor women will not be apparent to the powers-that-be—at least not just yet. Let us begin to address the questions that your Committee has thrown up.” He gave me an advisory committee of outstanding social scientists, jurists and experts in public policy who shared our apprehensions

about the Emergency. The policy paper for the programme drafted by me and finalised by the advisory committee adopted an action orientation from the beginning, but garbed it in social science language to which the Government of India could find no objection. The objectives were (a) analysis of data to uncover significant trends in social and economic organisations which affect women's position in the long run; to

improve policies for socio-economic development; increase public consciousness; and assess programmes for women's development and welfare; (b) develop new perspectives in the social sciences by critiquing basic assumptions, methodological approaches and concepts used in social research—to remedy the neglect and under-assessment of women's contribution to society; and (c) *to revive the social debate on the women's question initiated during the freedom struggle but since consigned to oblivion.*

The ICSSR was a funding agency. It was my task to interest scholars to take up the needed studies. Naik Sab kept me on the run—attending seminars and conferences in India and abroad—to stimulate debates on the interface between the multiple processes of change affecting India and other countries, and the roles and status of women. Aided and abetted by his friends within the UN System and radical thinkers exploring alternatives in development I found myself acquiring a celebrity/ expert status which posed the danger of heady excitement and losing my bearings; but memories of my father and the lessons I had received from DSK, Naik Sab and above all, my two mothers, protected me.

The general elections of 1977 which brought the Emergency to an end heralded an explosion of people's movements, among which the women's movement would soon emerge as a major force for social and political transformation. While these were getting under way, social scientist allies within the Planning Commission and the bureaucracy—orchestrated by a member of the Advisory Committee on Women's Studies—began exercises in policy reviews on women's rights to employment, health and education especially in rural areas. As a common factor in all these reviews, the planning and drafting skills learnt in the UGC, CSWI and the ICSSR became my assets, as well as major burdens of responsibility as a “self-appointed representative of the women's cause” for which the constituency had still to emerge.

The last 25 years

Naik Sab retired from the ICSSR in 1978. Though the year ended with a very successful organisation of various sessions on women organised by Leela Dube and myself as a part of the 10th World Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (Delhi, December 1978), I began to realise that our support base was weakening. In September 1979 the advisory committee, after a review of the achievements of the programme, adopted *a resolution recommending an autonomous and adequately resourced institution to carry on the “seminal work” initiated by the ICSSR*. The recommendation, which carried the support of the Women’s Bureau (the national machinery created by the GOT in 1975 in response to the UN’s appeal) was forwarded to the Government of India by the ICSSR. In spite of support from a small section of the higher bureaucracy, however, our ally within the Planning Commission informed us that we were losing the battle. He advised me to organise a women’s front (*morcha*) with the help of women political activists if anything was to be achieved.

In January 1980 another general election brought Indira Gandhi back to power. A small group from the advisory committee decided to start the Centre for Women’s Development Studies as an independent research institute with multi-dimensional objectives which could seek regular support from the ICSSR after three years—as permitted under the ICSSR’s programme for social science research institutes. I took all the leave which was due to me and started off in May 1980 as the Director. Naik Sab brushed aside all my apprehensions about resources with a blunt statement, “Good work that needs to be done never gets held up for lack of resources, only for lack of determination.” He took care to mobilise the initial support, but his death in 1981 left me and my colleagues in the Centre feeling really orphaned.

Necessity however is the mother of invention. Over the next few years I had to learn new skills for mobilising human and other resources, of alliance-building and coalition-forming at various levels—within and outside the country, the UN system and the media. Innovations in research and teaching methodology which had been so difficult during my long years within the university system could be tried out at the grassroots level—organising non-literate, poverty-stricken women agricultural workers, bringing back the lessons learnt there to allies within the government, the growing ranks of women’s studies scholars and national women’s organisations which had formed a coalition in 1980, to take over the task of battling with the State for women’s just share of development resources;

against policies that adversely affected women's rights, dignity and autonomy; and eventually for their right to have a voice in the future shape and character of India's democracy.

The CWDS opted for a catalyst role to promote a concern for women among different sections of society. Failure to influence institutions of higher education through the ICSSR programme led to the idea of forming the Indian Association for Women's Studies on the model of other academic associations in the country. Rejecting the notion of social sciences as "value free", women's studies in India adopted an activist, interventionist role in the struggle for gender justice as our inherited social responsibility, and as an outcome of the benefits we had received from the equality clauses of the Constitution. As persons with years of experience within the education system, we recognised the transformative capacity of educational institutions, if only they understood and sought to eliminate obstacles to gender justice—structural, behavioural, and in the realm of values inherited from the past and flowing from the present. The sources of these obstacles were not only to be found in India but in the increasing homogenisation emanating from the process of globalisation, and from the stereotyping of women which bore little resemblance to the reality on the ground. We achieved a victory in pressurising the Government of India in 1986 to incorporate the section on Education for Women's Equality within the National Policy on Education adopted by Parliament in 1986. Women's Studies were to be promoted within existing institutions as a transformative instrument—to enable educational institutions to play "a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women".

While the women's movement is multi-polar, more affected by differences in political ideology that characterise the political reality of democratic India, women's studies' institutional base is mostly among people used to a pattern of discipline as professionals. Despite such differences and occasional tensions, the relationship between the two has remained close, continuous and mutually interdependent. The Indian women's movement in the last quarter of the 20th century made choices to resolve various crises of identity, ideology, the politics of governance and the rule of law, society and culture, power and responsibility. It is an ongoing, live and complex process as reflected in the turbulence and creativity displayed by members of the twin movements. Our methods and sources of learning have been revolutionised. I have been learning, as well as unlearning, much more from unlettered peasant women and outspoken poor women in the urban informal sector, and have come to value and

admire their courage, grit and intellectual and moral capacity to absorb new knowledge and blend it with their inherited and experiential knowledge to challenge their subordination, exclusion and invisibility. Respect for their ever-widening social responsibility as they discover their constitutional rights to equality, justice, dignity, participation and development has left me, and many like me, empowered, with no regrets for having abandoned my earlier ambition of scholarly achievement.

Kumudini Lakhia (b. 1930) is a renowned Kathak dancer and choreographer who was taught and influenced by the famous Ram Gopal. She has performed in over 40 countries, but chose to give up her career as a solo performer to start the Kadamb Dance Centre in Ahmedabad, where she trains students in the art of classical Kathak dance. Her other achievements include choreographing for two very successful Hindi films, *Umrao Jaan* and *Sur Sangam*. Her awards include the All India Sangeet Natya Kala Award (1977); Sangeet Natak Akademi National Award (1982); Kala Ratna Award; Sangeet Kala Sangam; (1982); and the Padma Shri in 1987. On the occasion of 50 years of Independence, the city of Ahmedabad awarded her with the Nagar Bhushan.



Bridges

KUMUDIMI LAKHIA

If my younger self could see me now she would be incredulous. That I would work in the field of dance or decipher and translate dance for my own comprehension, call it choreography if you wish, and would have been unbelievable. In this respect, I am particularly envious of dancers who claim that they were “born to dance”, implying that it was clearly laid out for them from the beginning. I must say, I find this assertion dubious; it is rarely that

easy. To dance means to struggle—I believe it is the same in any discipline, because discipline itself is a struggle. I believe I was not simply born to dance; I was born to live. And now, as the patchwork of my life comes into clearer focus, I can see clear bridges between my life experiences and my work in dance.

In all truth, as a child I never did want to dance; it was forced upon me by a doting mother and a silent father. My father probably kept his peace to avoid argument. From the beginning my lessons took place under trying conditions, though I believe that the conditions were more trying for my mother than for me. She travelled in local, over-crowded trains to dance class with an unwilling child, tired from a whole day at school. She waited a whole hour in the not-so-clean ante-room of my guru's house and then endured the same journey back. This was in Bombay, and my first dance lessons were with Guru Sunder Prasad who lived in Chowpatty while we lived in Khar. We took the train, then a bus and then walked, and the whole trip took roughly 45 minutes each way.

Interestingly, it was the film industry that spurred my mother to enrol me in dance classes. When I was seven, we went to see a movie starring Mumtaz Ali, father of the comedian, Mehmood. Ali did a dance number in the film, with which I became fascinated. When we arrived home I began prancing around the house imitating the film actor, and my mother, who was quietly watching, was the one who said, "Kumudini, you are born to dance." Ironically, I have no recollection of this story; it was my mother who saw this innate ability in me. Her belief was so strong that she went through the gruelling exercise of taking me to dance class four days a week without complaint.

However, my childhood education was composed of much more than just dance and academics. I did not live in a vacuum. I was surrounded by life and learnt many of my lessons there, lessons that I still carry with me. I grew up during a volatile era, a time of war, India's independence movement compounded by World War II in which India played a role in military operations. My father, being an engineer, was called upon to build the cantonment areas, first in Delhi, then in Naini and Allahabad. In Delhi we were allotted a sprawling house on Hardinge Avenue (now Tilak Marg) with Liaquat Ali (later Prime Minister of Pakistan) as our neighbour. Once, his gardener caught me and my brother, Suresh, picking guavas from his tree. He grabbed us by the ear and presented us before the master for punishment. Liaquat Ali not only let us keep the guavas, but extended an open invitation to pick the fruits whenever we wished! However, this generous offer was

accompanied by the *mail's* face which was so horrifying and revengeful, that we never went near that garden again. It was one of my first lessons in the games politicians play.

Father would now have to move to wherever army construction was required. Therefore, when I was nine years old, the decision was made to send me to boarding school. After a lot of arguments, advice, consideration and research on the part of my parents, I was packed off to Queen Mary's College (school) in Lahore (at that time in India). I had not known a day away from home, but the idea of living with a lot of girls of my age and studying in a fancy school was both exciting and worrisome, as curiosity was mixed with sadness. No more shuffling to and from class, no more overbearing Guruji.

No such luck. Mother sent a dance teacher, Radhelal Misra, Sunder Prashad's nephew, along with me! She hired a small apartment for him in Lahore, and arranged a schedule for my lessons. Despite her belief that I was "born" to dance, I didn't enjoy dance classes. Quite frankly, they were no fun. I felt as if nothing progressed, that I was just doing what my guru ordered. I was always a curious child and I wanted to know and understand what I was doing. Why was I gyrating in this way? But my teacher could not, or would not, explain it to me. I was envious of other girls who were playing tennis and basketball while I was doing this thing called Kathak. My mother convinced the principal, a Britisher, that to dance was a form of prayer and that she could not curb religious freedom! Having spent several years in a school where most of our teachers were British I have come to like their form of discipline. Discipline in one's daily routine does bring discipline in thinking. You begin to place your thoughts in neat little piles the way you do your uniforms and shoes.

It was three weeks before the final school examinations—matriculation at that time—when my life changed dramatically. I was called to the Principal's office. What had I done? The only reason one was called to Miss Cox's office was because of some infraction. While she was a kind and diplomatic person, she was also strict and firm and later, when I myself became a teacher, I was influenced by her demeanour. As I approached the office, I wondered, did I forget to put away the tennis racquets after morning play? Did I forget to lock the door of the dormitory?

"May I come in, Madam?" I asked quietly.

"Yes, do come in, child," she answered with a voice full of such kindness that it made me suspicious. "You have to go home."

“But why? I have to study for my exams!”

“Your father called to say that your mother is sick and he would like you to visit her.”

During the walk back from Miss Cox’s office to my classroom I was overwhelmed with feelings of confusion, a state of ‘mind I have never completely got over. Even today, when I want to create a new piece, the first theme that comes to my mind vibrates with confusion.

Mother was already dead when I arrived, 36 hours and three train-rides later. When I saw her, motionless and colourless, I finally understood why I had been summoned home. I was 14 years old. The air was still and nobody looked at me. I did not know where to turn or what to do with my hands, which hung loose from my body. Then suddenly they clutched my stomach. Hunger pangs? I hadn’t eaten for three days and there was an emptiness I wanted to fill. I was afraid of appearing greedy/ so I underplayed my emotions, though all kinds of yearning gnawed my insides.

Even today I mistake the different kinds of hunger inside me, and this is something that shows up in my work. The dangling arms find expression in my choreography. In “*Duvidha*” or “Conflict”, I examined the plight of a middle-class woman who is chained to the traditions of Indian life. She is restricted to domestic circles, is forbidden from wearing sleeveless blouses, must wear her hair in a bun and must cater to her husband. Yet, from a small window she sees the newspaperman waving images of a woman with a bold streak of white in her short hair, who wears sleeveless blouses, is surrounded by men who listen to her intently, is widowed but wears colourful saris. Moreover, she commands a country with millions of people. Yet, while the woman looking out of the window is intrigued by this image, she experiences conflicting emotions. The character in “*Duvidha*” is torn between two lives-she feels an emptiness within her, but is not sure what she is hungry for, what kind of life she wants. This is something I have felt often, yet now that I have so much behind me, I am more certain of where to place my hands.

My exams yielded surprisingly good results. So, now what? Where do I go from here? This question has cropped up throughout my life, and many years later took shape in my composition, “*Atah Kim*”. It’s funny how we store our experiences in our brains as if we are pre-recorded cassettes. The right cassette seems to fall into place when you least expect it to. Upon finishing school, I was at a crossroads and the path ahead was not clear to me. I had lots of ideas about what I wanted to do with my life, and dance

was not always a priority. I was always driven, and that partly stems from the fact that I had a relatively subdued childhood. I was enveloped by a great mist of protection and I wanted to emerge from that mist and discover myself. In particular, I wanted to feel powerful; to control a large group of people. In "*Atah Kim*" I address this desire for power, and yet—once you possess it, what do you do with it? Once you reach your goal, where do you go from there? It's a question without an answer, but I believe the question must be asked.

At the age of 15 I had many options. It would have been easy enough to join college for a bachelor's or master's degree in psychology or English literature. But everyone does that. "You have to do something that is offbeat, different from the done thing," my father said to me. So it was that I decided to attend an agriculture college in Naini, Allahabad. There were twenty-nine boys and I, in a class of thirty. Having spent my school years in a girls' school I knew little about the behaviour of boys. My brother was seven years younger so his friends were no help. However, at the agriculture college I got a taste of relations between boys and girls. We had to travel for miles in the fields on bicycles. The boys deflated the tires of my bicycle so that they could walk back with me, resulting in miles and miles of worthless conversation about the latest film songs and actors, none of which interested me.

Also, I was fascinated by the professors, mostly American, who wore shorts because we worked in fields with clay, crops, manure and insecticides. One day, I also turned up in shorts and had 58 eyes peering at my legs! My grandmother had always said that girls must never push their chests out or uncover their legs. I now realized what she meant, but couldn't accept it as valid. "What about the short blouses you wear, with your midriff showing?" I asked her.

"Don't argue," was her reply.

When will we understand the dignity of the female body? A dancer has to move with dignity, a quality much desired amongst dancers but sadly missing in most, especially women, as they are taught to underplay their bodies most of their lives. My grandmother, of course, was not completely to blame for this attitude. It is a problem that goes deep into the texture of our society. We must embrace our senses and use them to the fullest, rather than try to inhibit them.

Another argument I often had with my grandmother was about religion and visiting temples. "Go to the temple before your exams, God will give

you strength to do well,” she would say. I took issue with the idea that an outside force must be bargained with in order to obtain desirable results. Doesn’t this strength come from within? I had a hard time believing that it was God alone who endowed me with this ability. Visiting temples activates your senses, though we often take this for granted. You see the grandeur of the architecture and can feel the curve of the stones. The scent of incense, flowers and sandalwood mingle together. You hear the ringing of the bells and taste the *Panchamrut*. With your palms and the soles of your feet you touch the different surfaces. What an experience! Why do I have to bargain with God as if he is some kind of agent for a trading company? Yet these arguments with my grandmother were useful in that they made me differentiate between sensitivity and sentimentality. Later, I created a piece called “*Panch Paras*”, the five senses, to explore this realm.

After graduating with a degree in agriculture at the age of 18 I was left with few job prospects and was again at a crossroads. Luckily, good fortune came to me without much beckoning. It happened in Bombay. I had gone to the train station to see off Suresh who was studying at Sherwood College in Nainital. While I was waving to the train that had now disappeared, there was a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and the woman who stood there changed the course of my life. All those tedious hours of dance lessons fused into a new synergy. She was Komlata Dutt, a friend of my father’s and, more importantly, the person who introduced Uday Shankar to the dance legend, Anna Pavlova, in Paris. And here she was, telling me to join the Ram Gopal Dance Company based in London!

It took some learning to adjust to working with a group of professional dancers and musicians, on the move all the time, and the opportunity exposed me to a very different aspect of dance education—there was a lot of dance to be learnt as well—kummi of Kerala, ghumar of Rajasthan, dandia of Gujarat—all were part of the troupe’s repertoire. What I enjoyed most was learning the classical Bharatanatyam from Ram Gopal himself who was a strict disciplinarian and had a fetish for perfection of line. However, in the end he would say, “You’ve perfected the technique, now throw it overboard and dance.” This is a lesson I have tried to teach my own students—before you begin experimenting, you need to perfect the technique with which you experiment.

Touring with Ram Gopal not only taught me more about dance, I discovered new things about my own personality. Encountering people from different countries gives you a chance to look at yourself in a new light. More often than not, I found that my weaknesses were brought glaringly into

focus. I came to realize the importance of context how things change when you change their placement. One of the most striking moments of that tour was my time in post-war Germany. It was an unbelievably sad place. Hungry children begging for food is a common sight in India, yet in Germany the same sight created a different sensation. It amazed me how the same situation in a different environment evokes quite different reactions, and the same is true in dance. One changes the placement of a choreographic piece on stage and it looks quite different. I myself was a changed person when placed in different surroundings.

Still, a long tour of many countries in Europe and America is exhausting. I was constantly travelling between India and various parts of the globe. In all, I was abroad for three years and by the end, I needed to go home. But where was home? And how does one make a home for oneself? Buy a house, get married, have children, make friends? I had only the last item on the agenda. While in school in Lahore I had made a lot of friends, but they now lived in a different country—Pakistan. I had to obtain a visa to visit my closest friend over a weekend. I would like to say I am apolitical, but I've discovered that politics makes its presence felt even when uninvited.

On my return, the last of many returns, what ultimately awaited me were marriage, children and a flat in Bombay. Finally I had a home, but it came with strings attached—I now had to manage this new home. In a society like ours, where a woman wanting to work outside the home must do so in addition to her domestic responsibilities, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Still, I didn't do too badly thanks to my supportive husband, Rajanikant. In spite of his own background in a family where men are treated as a special breed, he was a good man, with the extraordinary quality of believing everything. The word "suspicion" was absent from his vocabulary. This made him popular but unsuccessful, both as a professional and a parent, but a very accommodating husband. My biggest benefit from my association with him was the love of music he instilled in me. If he had chosen music as a profession he would have done better in life, but his bar-at-law from Lincoln's Inn in London pushed him into the wrong line of work.

I must say, I am blessed with a wonderful family, two normal and healthy children, my son Shriraj and daughter Maitreyi, now married with their own children. Looking back, I keep wondering what my contribution was as a mother, but it must have been satisfactory to attain these results. And yet, both are completely different in their attitudes and philosophies—one has an extended sense of ambition and the other allows things to transpire as they are destined to. The only point on which they agree is that they disagree with

my profession! It is interesting to have this kind of variety in a family. Living with a group of different personalities beneath one roof is like performing with other artistes on stage. The equation, the space factor, vibrations and relationships must be taken into serious consideration. You are no longer performing solo. You belong to a larger image and must develop a new set of performing skills.

After my marriage and the birth of my two children, I gave dance a miss for a short while only to discover that I didn't want to break away completely. I realized that I had started a secret love affair with Kathak that simply wouldn't disappear. Kathak is like the miniature paintings of Kangra and Rajasthan, like the fine weaving of the jamawar shawls of Kashmir. There is something so profound and yet so delicate about this form. I decided to study Kathak in more depth. I was accepted by Guru Shambu Maharaj who taught at the Bharatiya Kala Kendra in New Delhi. I was to do a two-year intensive study with him on a national scholarship award. I arrived in Delhi with no address, but finally found a place in a prime location near Connaught Place. It was a type of paying guest accommodation for women. The other girls, I thought, were very friendly and even invited me to parties that evening. Good fortune never lasts long. I soon discovered that these girls were, by my moral values, involved in a suspicious profession. The next day when I went to the dance centre I must have looked disturbed because Mrs. Sumitra Charatram, who was the president at the time, asked me if I was ill. After hearing about my problem, she bundled me into her car, drove me to where I lived and packed my bags. I stayed with her for two years as a member of her family. Can one find people like that now who will take a stranger in with open arms? This sense of belonging revived my faith in my decision to give dance a chance as a profession.

Three years of training with the great master were invaluable. Besides dance I learnt a lot simply from his narratives about his own life. Shambu Maharaj was not only an accomplished dancer, teacher and singer, but also an incredibly charismatic human being. He would recount the simplest incidents with such exuberance and embellish them gorgeously. From Maharajji I discovered that the theme of a story did not have to be extravagant or complex to be captivating. Rather, it is the way it is rendered that makes the difference. Later, as a choreographer, I was able to focus on simple themes like "Sound" and "Power" and create a whole evening's programme.

During my training period in Delhi, the Bharatiya Kala Kendra started producing what they called "dance ballets". The first one, "*Malati Madhav*"

was performed during the National Dance Festival in 1959. Everyone gave advice on how to produce it without knowing anything about production. Some people thought it was a good show, but I thought it was a disaster. I was very uncomfortable in my role as the heroine, *Malati*, because I didn't understand the relationships between the characters in the play. It is so important that every dancer feels part of the whole, since this group of individuals must move as one body. This is very difficult to achieve because, in traditional classical Indian dance, each student is trained to become a solo dancer. There is no concept of training to dance in a group or to train as a choreographer in India. Most artistes who dabble in choreography are self-taught, and the end product is usually a rearrangement of existing forms, in different directions, by a group of solo performers. Choreography is more than this. It is about translating your thought process into a design of dance, using the technique you know best.

After my training the only obvious future for me was to give solo performances at different venues in India, called music conferences. Stages were bad. There was no concept of lighting—it was just illumination, and when the light man was paid a little extra he would bring a circular gadget with many colours and turn it round and round so that the dancer looked red, green, blue, amber or pink. For the most part, audiences were awed by the effect. I also found that audiences in India don't have their priorities right. They clap for all the wrong reasons and are not interested in dance. After some time, I began to wonder why I should dance for them. Moreover, solo dancing never excited me because it had too much of the circus element in it. I often felt like a horse jumping hurdles when I danced solo pieces, and I disliked the unpleasant task of looking for venues and being forced to smile at critics. It all seemed such a waste of time.

So, what do I do?

It was around this time that I experienced a second shattering event. Suresh, my brother who lived in Italy, took ill. I made three trips to Italy because I wanted to spend time with him, as I knew he was dying. Just as I was preparing to make my third trip, I heard that he had died. We had grown up together, and for us that meant much more than simply living under the same roof. Losing our mother at an early age had brought us very close and this bond has endured far beyond his death. Losing both these people, my mother and Suresh, made me understand that, while life ends in death, when you create something for the stage, it shouldn't die at the end. It must live many more lives, must live in the minds of the audience. I want to create art that is immortal.

Lots of little girls play “teacher” when they are small and I was no exception. But after I moved to Ahmedabad, I was ready to wear the mantle of a real teacher. One thing I did not want to do was to teach the way I was taught. Whenever I asked my guru a question about dance or pointed out a contradiction in his teachings, he would give me the same answer as my grandmother, “Don’t argue.” There is no room for questioning in the *guru-shishya parampara*, and I had a lot of complaints about established teaching methods. “Look in front; raise your hand over your head!” Front, where? How high? I wanted the exact measures (don’t forget I was educated in a British school!) The teaching method I follow must have precise directions, angles, degrees, weights and measures. My dancers must understand the movements they perform, and are encouraged to be curious.

My first student was Sandhya. Her husband, Atul Desai, used to pick her up at the end of class. At first it was just, “Hello”. When I discovered that he was a musician the hellos became louder and were accompanied by a smile. One time, I asked him if he would like to compose the music for a dance piece I had choreographed. This led to a partnership of forty years, during which he has created the music for every one of my dance compositions. He is a most creative and sensitive person and has had many a valid suggestion to make during the creative process.

In the space of a few years a number of girls were beginning to dance well I realized that they couldn’t all become solo dancers because there weren’t that many venues—unless you lived in Delhi where you could dance for VIPs, politicians, ambassadors and visiting dignitaries. There was so much of this that people in Delhi have forgotten that there is an India outside their city. It is beneficial for a dancer to be in Delhi because one makes the right contacts, lobbies for grants and awards and is seen at the right places with the right people. Still, I don’t think I could have endured such excitement. I was happy teaching a small group of students, but they surprised me by becoming rather good dancers. What does one do with them? I composed a dance with five dancers.

How does one start composing? One must look within for sources. I asked myself, “What beats inside me?” and I discovered my heart and my pulse (*dhabkar*) beating like a pair of drums. This dance number, “*Dhabkar*”, is like the pulse of Kathak. There must have been something timeless about it because even after thirty years it still looks fresh. When choosing a theme, most dancers draw upon stories from mythology Programmes based on such stories are the easiest to sell because audiences are already familiar with them. The end result is a popular and acceptable programme. But

choreography is not about acceptability; it is about individual expression. My main concern is not to offer the audience what it expects but to stretch the viewer's mind, to create dance that provokes thought.

Similarly, a choreographer must go beyond simply dance design, meaning you must pour your life into your work to make it come alive. I have concentrated much of my effort in connecting my work with my life experiences, not allowing one to be isolated from the other. Too often, I find that we compartmentalise our lives and our abilities. I have noticed this in particular with the management of time. In dance traditions a lot of emphasis is placed on understanding Time and its variables. One studies and tries to master it because it is absolutely necessary in order to dance well. However, the management of time in one's own life often remains a neglected area. It is a matter of applying one discipline to another area of your existence. One must get down to building those bridges! In "*Setu*" (Bridge), I focussed on building bridges in one's life. However, I added an element of blindness to the character because we don't see the bridges when we cross them. It is only when we look back that we see the bridge and the water flowing beneath it.

I work in a profession where retirement is not an option, one must always go on. Each day the empty space stares me in the face; I see a bare, echoing room. I sit on the floor, staring at the vast area and at how small these bodies look in this expanse. Slowly, instead of emptiness, I see a space charged with dormant energy, waiting to take form. Like waking a sleeping giant, I begin moving these bodies in space, allowing music to guide me and gradually the forms begin to emerge. They are forms born from my own life, patterns with which I am closely connected. The bodies slowly become larger than life, the space becomes flexible, and each time it is like a new conversation between time and space.

I have not had to look outside of Kathak in order to create any of my pieces. I believe Kathak is much richer than people believe. When I chose the name "Kadamb" for my dance school, I was thinking about the nature of Kathak. Kadamb, for me, has a double meaning. First, it is the traditional tree under which Krishna dances and its roots run deep and strong, much like the foundation of Kathak itself; at the same time, it offers a fresh treat to the senses. From the decorative, textured bark that covers it to the fragrant white flowers that bloom on its branches, thick with lush green leaves, the kadamb tree is abundant with life and personality. I have had no desire to go searching beyond its shade.

Kadamb, for me, has become more than a dance centre; in a sense, it is my temple. Here we are very religious about dance, and we respect and nurture it. When I look back at my extended family of hundreds of students over the last forty years, I am thrilled that the branches of this tree have grown so wide. Some of my students have made it big as teachers, choreographers, even as critics. If I were offered *a* chance to live my life again, would I want it any different? I don't think so, I believe it would have been a shame had I been "born to dance", because I have derived strength from the winding branches of the challenges in my life, and it is the branches that hold the flowers that bloom.

Romila Thapar (b. 1931) is a foremost historian of ancient India. Her singular contribution has been the study of the 6th century B.C., and especially the period of the emperor Asoka. She has pioneered in the area of social history and, more recently, explored the links between culture, society and history, at how histories get made and represented. As a public intellectual she has consistently cautioned against the misinterpretation of history for political ends, and upheld the need for secularism in our polity. She is the author of many highly regarded books on ancient Indian history, among them the seminal *A History of India*; *The Past and Prejudice*; *Ancient Indian Social History*; and *Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories*. She is the recipient of numerous awards and honours, and of at least four honorary degrees from the University of Chicago, (1993); Peradeniya University, Sri Lanka (1992); Institute National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris (2001); and the University of Oxford, 2002. In 1997 she was awarded the Fukuoka Cultural Prize.



Histories, Past and Present

ROMILA THAPAR

Among my earliest memories are those of a small school of boys and girls, and days of fun and games rather than study. This was partly because I had started learning the alphabet at home. As an accidental exercise in bilingualism I had been taught the English alphabet and also the Urdu alphabet, because I belong to that generation of Punjabis who, when they wrote letter to their grandmothers in Punjabi, often wrote them in the Urdu script. From this school I proceeded to other schools, and my schooling gradually became more formal. We went first to Dalhousie, where my father was briefly posted, and from there to Peshawar and then Rawalpindi. Prior to being at school I had lived in the forts of what was then called the North West Frontier Province, my father being a medical officer in the army. After Rawalpindi he was posted to Pune. That was a big change, because the earlier location had been Punjabi and Pathan societies, and now suddenly I was in the heart of Maharashtrian society. The language and landscape were very different, but Pune was where I had the longest stay of my itinerant childhood.

Formal schooling was not all that different from Peshawar and Rawalpindi because convent schools were reasonably uniform in the country—although I had to change schools on five occasions—so the problem was less the actual schooling and more of having to make new friends each time. But there was a shift from a co-educational school to a girls' school and now that I reflect on it, these were diverse experiences. Companionship in the girls' schools was relaxed and academic competition somehow less severe (not that it was a major issue in the kinds of schools I went to). Boys were a topic of conversation but not unduly so. Part of the process of growing up was to talk about those in whose midst we lived, with others at school.

...I think I was interested in history right from the beginning, but not in a clearly defined way, because I was torn between three subjects: history, literature and botany. We had the same teacher for history and literature who was excellent, constantly provoking us to ask questions and to think for ourselves, and we had a very glamorous botany teacher! I enjoyed botany because we were taken to magnificent gardens in and around Pune. We drew plants or studied sections under a microscope, so there was the visual impact. Equally fascinating was observing the process of change from simple forms to complex ones. But history and literature, yes, that was a much more, what shall I call it, a more cerebral level of interest. Now that I think about it, neither of these teachers were nuns although they were teaching in a convent.

I eventually chose to study history for two reasons, I think: one very personal and the other more public. I had six months between the end of school and the beginning of the university term, and my father at that time became interested in learning about south Indian bronze sculpture, as a hobby. He was an unusual person because in the Thirties his hobby was making silent movies, and some were excellent. But with this new interest he brought home large tomes on iconography, history and art-history, and insisted that I read them as well so that he would have somebody to discuss them with. My mother opted out, saying she had enough other things to do. I resented it in the beginning that my six month vacation was being turned to hard work, but I did start reading and slowly I got hooked and began to read more on history and to learn some Sanskrit.

But equally influential in the Forties was the crescendo of the national movement. Living in Pune that influence was even greater because Gandhiji would hold his prayer meetings, to which we frequently went. Nationalism was in the air and the coming of independence, imminent. So the burning questions were: how do we understand our past and how did we envisage the future of our society? Inevitably, history was also in the air.

Now, questions of nationalism were handled at two levels in school. When we discussed it, we were introduced to the notion that nationalism is a phase that societies go through, and parallels were drawn with the French Revolution, Italian nationalism and German unification. The very important differences between these and anti-colonialism came to the fore in discussions on Indian nationalism. Although the teachers were obviously not hostile to British rule, they were very open to discussion. We were being constantly told—and perhaps just occasionally tongue-in-cheek—that since independence is imminent, you as young people must think about the kind of state you will inherit after independence and how you would like to shape it. The actual transition in 1947 was much more problematic of course, because there were a few of us who had relatives and family involved in the Partition. I suddenly realized, that during those crucial two weeks of August, the newspapers were not available in school and, my parents being away, I was living in school at the time. We were getting snippets of information about riots from the day-scholars. Obviously what was worrying the school was that without a parental context, children reading the newspapers would probably get upset. When we had our October break and I went home I realized what had happened. I was very resentful in the beginning, that this information had been kept from me, but when I look back on it I am in two minds about it. Nevertheless I think it would have been better to discuss the

events of Partition at school, because for many of us the biggest blow was the realization that there was now a rather unexpected divide between Hindus and Muslims.

What I am really impressed about was the nuns approach to August 15, 1947. There was a ceremony involving the whole school, invoking blessings on the new country and as a Prefect, I was asked to plant a tree and make a speech. That was my first public speech! And I was so nervous, as I always am when speaking in public. I rewrote the speech day in and day out. Finally, we had the ceremony and I planted a tree and made my speech through a mixture of emotions, trying not to be overwhelmed by the moment and at the same time so proud of Indian independence. The tree by the way, is still growing.'

I think it's very important how, as historians we respond to these kinds of traumatic moments—we've had 1984 with the Delhi riots, again 1992 with the Babri Masjid, and so on. It's important to talk about sensitive issues and not push them aside or hide them. It's more important especially with children, to explain the background, let them talk about it, tell them how people are looking at it in different ways, and make them aware that this is not a situation where one group is black and the other is white: that there are many nuances in these relationships. And that the process by which hostility and antagonism develops is not something that has existed for centuries, but that local, recent events can lead to such situations. I'm pleased that there is a new interest in Partition emerging among historians, and it's a different kind of writing from what has been written so far.

College in Pune was the Wadia College, not too demanding and generally pleasant. I cycled in every morning because it was close enough and moved around with a group of friends. I had only two years there after which my father was transferred back to Delhi. This time I had to accompany my parents and, inevitably, I joined Miranda House. But Delhi University insisted on my doing a three year honours course from the start, because Poona University had a four-year system with an intermediate of arts. The thought of spending five years just getting a B.A. degree was too depressing, so I did a brief stint at Miranda House, for four months I think, and had a ball. Eventually I went to Simla and took my B.A. Hons. from Punjab University so as to complete it fast. I needed the degree for admission to London University, to join the School of Oriental and African Studies where I wanted to do an M.A. in history. My father told me that he had put aside some money as my dowry, and I could choose to use it either as dowry or to finance two years at London University. I opted for London University,

although I was quite disinterested in an academic career at that point. The attraction was being in London, and then thought to be the centre of the universe. There was gentle parental pressure for me to reconsider my decision but I must confess that both my parents were very liberal about leaving it to me. I was extremely lucky in my parents.

And I was absolutely overwhelmed by London. The accessibility of various activities was stunning. Anything that I wanted to do—any courses that I wanted to follow, any lectures, concerts, jazz clubs, art exhibitions, poetry readings, plays, films, the lot—it was there. It was like living in a wish-fulfilling dream. This had never happened to me before, because comparatively, life in an Indian town was restricted for a young woman. Not that it was easy to fit in everything because London University rules required me to take a B.A. honours in history (my Punjab B.A. having been in literature) before I could even think of an M.A. But they permitted me to do it in two years instead of the normal three. It was eventually very useful as it trained me in historical methods and the handling of sources. But I still made time for other interests. In my first year I joined a diploma course in Chinese art and archaeology because I thought I should have some familiarity with another Asian civilisation. So despite these activities I managed a good result and was now even more keen to stay on in London. But my father said very firmly that he couldn't finance me further, and there weren't the kinds of opportunities then that there are now for getting jobs in London. I toyed with the idea of becoming a journalist but my brother thought I wasn't cut out for that. Professor (A.R.) Basham, who had been my tutor, suggested that I apply for a London University research scholarship. I was hesitant at first but eventually did so and to my surprise was awarded one, so that kind of sealed my fate in terms of both staying on in London and of eventually becoming an academic.

I wanted to do a reinterpretation of the reign of Asoka Maurya because I was fascinated by the personality that comes through in his edicts. He was a remarkable statesman, insisting on a social ethic and attempting to implement it. I wanted to investigate the degree to which it was inspired by his interest in Buddhism or as a response to a historical context. I tried to argue that the response was a primary factor, but the impact of Buddhism was by no means irrelevant. I have a tremendous admiration for him, even though some have criticized me for what they read as a critical assessment of his policies. And it was a nodal point in early Indian history—there was a build-up towards a state, towards urbanisation, towards political change on a scale not experienced before. The systems that went into the making of the

Mauryan experience and the dispersal of these elements in the post-Mauryan period gives added dimensions to early history

After my PhD I still wanted to stay on in London, but by that time I had realized that one can't go on being, in a sense, a dilettante. Also, in the course of doing research I began to feel that if the ideas that I had developed relating to the study of ancient history were to be in any way relevant, I would have to teach in a university in India. My thinking was beginning to turn in that direction, and various personal factors contributed to it. As it happened I was offered a position in a new university, at Kurukshetra, so I shifted from London to Kurukshetra in 1961 when it opened. Why Kurukshetra? Well, I saw myself as a kind of academic pioneer! There was to be an ancient Indian history department, in which the courses and teaching were to be planned by me. I thought this was incredible, and as a starting job it was really too good to be true. You see, I was rash enough to see myself as a pioneer and if one sees oneself as one, somehow the guts develop. The anti-climax was that there was no faculty in my department, no students, no library, so I couldn't start courses. My notions of setting up a department and of teaching were very different from what the university was actually offering at that point. Subsequently, of course, it became a very respectable university. So there I was, literally in the boondocks, with nothing to do. Before returning to India I had signed a contract with Penguin for writing the first volume of the History of India. I was desperate because there was so much I had to read for this book—but there was no library! So after a year and a half I decided I'd had enough. I applied for a UGC fellowship and moved to Delhi. A year later they advertised a Readership at Delhi University and I was appointed.

Being a woman academic was enormously different from being a male academic. Not only did I feel it, I was made to feel it. I had colleagues, some of whom resented a woman having a teaching position. They would joke with the students about my being the daughter of an army officer and therefore inherently incapable of understanding ancient history. As happens with other women, I too became obsessed with the notion that if I was going to make any kind of positive impression, I would have to be twice as good as my male colleagues. Luckily, that's not very difficult! But let me add that there were also a few colleagues who were supportive of the changes and of a woman having a teaching position in the department. Still, I've been very conscious of being a woman in the profession, and this has been brought home to me repeatedly by the remarks of others. Women now have greater visibility, although by no means enough. One is generally much more aware

of gender problems because they have been voiced, but I've never really consciously thought of myself as a role model.

At the end of 1970 I shifted to Jawaharlal Nehru University, when the university had just started. It remained difficult to effect major changes at Delhi University possibly I didn't try hard enough—and JNU was attractive because it was starting from scratch and I suppose my pioneering instincts were revived! I gathered that there was a serious interest in inter-disciplinary courses and new ways of looking at conventional subjects. And we were able to innovate. The brief that we were given was to not unnecessarily replicate courses from existing departments of history, so we tried to formulate courses that were different. This was facilitated by relating them to semesters, with each requiring regular tutorials. At first our courses were criticised for being too innovative, but fortunately we persevered. Ten years later various universities— NEHU in Shillong, Hyderabad, and even Delhi University—slowly began adopting some of our courses, and that was very gratifying.

But the teaching was more demanding. The number of students was smaller, but they were required to read specifically on topics, write tutorial essays and discuss these in even smaller groups in the presence of the person teaching the course. The essays were graded for internal assessment. So the commitment to working with students was far greater than I'd known it to be in any other university in India. Strangely enough, it was also a period—the 1970s and 1980s—when I wrote, I think, more creatively than I had done before. The intensive discussions with students and my own research fed into one another, in the sense that the process of testing new ideas meant that they had to be clarified.

The Seventies were also very turbulent politically, and the 1975-77 period was extremely important because of Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency, which many of us in JNU Opposed. Then, to my great surprise, when the Morarji Desai government came to power, Morarji issued an order asking for the banning of our NCERT school textbooks in history (I had written the ancient and medieval India textbooks for classes VI and VII and they had been prescribed since 1966 and '67). This came as a surprise because the point about ending the Emergency was to restore freedom of expression. We were told that this was Nanaji Deshmukh's contribution to the Morarji government and this, therefore, was my first direct experience of the RSS. Now one is no longer surprised at the renewed attack on these books because one knows who's behind it. We decided then to oppose the ban on the principle that no prime minister as prime minister or education minister as education minister

can determine the contents of a history textbook. This has to be the prerogative of historians. So if the government were to set up a committee of historians to examine the books, we would stand by the decision of the committee. The committee that was eventually appointed approved of the books. For three years there was a public debate on this matter and one hoped that the debate would familiarise people with the importance of historical interpretation.

In *a* sense this debate was symptomatic of another aspect of the Seventies: the seeming modernity in Indian society. As a young woman I felt elated that a woman was prime minister even if I was not partial to her politics. We thought that a new India had emerged in the Sixties and that even at a broader level there would be change. The kinds of dreams and visions that we had had of a nation governed by democracy and secularism and the equality of citizens, might finally be taking shape. But in effect what we missed out on was that the change was superficial. Elements essential to democracy, secularism and equal citizenship were just not getting sufficient attention. Education was ignored, as were welfare and health; the accessibility of the legal system and human rights remained out of reach, and in a sense this has been at the root of the present crisis.

My twenty years at JNU were a very positive experience. I came into close contact with students who are now teaching effectively in other places or manning other jobs. I also got to know young people from various parts of the country and this was a truly insightful experience. The direction that we were able to give to the discipline of Indian history was in itself challenging, and although we were not the only ones, we provided critiques of a kind that led to innovations of thought. My interest focussed on questions of historiography and of investigating historical explanations; and also attempting a critical enquiry into various aspects of ancient history, as is evident from some of my essays in *Cultural Pasts*. These are aspects that demarcate the professional historian from the person who still thinks that history is just a body of information being handed down.

I miss my students very much. That was one of the great joys, the contact with a younger generation, trying to understand what they were making of the past or what they were trying to tell me. I found all that very stimulating. After retirement I've been able to do much more of my own work. I didn't take an extension because I thought I would do what I had wanted to do but hadn't done enough of earlier—listening to music, reading poetry, and doing other things, perhaps even potting! Of course, I'm not even doing that now because I'm frantically researching and writing and lecturing all over the

place, and lecturing particularly in remote places in India so as to educate myself.

Among my recent projects has been the rewriting of the first volume of the Penguin History of India. I wrote it when I was about thirty and it was never revised. I thought I would merely update it, but I soon realized that apart from some new evidence, my own interpretations have undergone a great change and I finally ended up writing virtually a new book. The next thing I want to complete is a small study of the aftermath of events at Somanatha subsequent to Mahmud of Ghazni's raid on the temple. This, in many ways, is an exercise in historical method. There is a juxtaposition of sources to make a kind of Rashomon-like story, an attempt to prise apart the encrustations of thought and perspectives that accumulate around an event over centuries, and finally there is the question of how memories are constructed about the past. And then I want to go back to one of my early loves, which I do off and on—a study of historical consciousness in early India. It is in part a refutation of the Orientalist theory that Indian civilisation never knew histories nor had a sense of history; and partly an attempt to understand how the past was captured and reflected in early writings, and how it was used for purposes of legitimising concepts and persons.

What's happening in history today is that the impact of the earlier shift away from an Indological to a social sciences perspective in the discipline is only now beginning to be felt by those who've always treated ancient history as a part of Indology. The impact is sometimes resented because it involves new ways of handling history. I think the change will be expressed at two levels. If the present government continues, the existing school curriculum will be wiped out and replaced by subjects that don't teach students how to think because those in power fear thinking people. A generation of Indians growing up will be unaware not only of history, but of the social sciences as well, as effective methods of enquiry. Nevertheless, I think that the minority of those who are anxious to establish themselves as independent historians, social scientists and scientists will have to resist government pressures and assert their intellectual freedom. That's written into any system of knowledge. The only question is the degree of viability that this knowledge and its practitioners can claim. So I wouldn't say that I'm altogether pessimistic. I think that there will be pockets of excellence, but by and large the gains that have been made in terms of reorienting ourselves to our past in the last half-century, those gains may be destroyed if the present policy continues.

It's very difficult to stand up against a government that refuses to hear. But the constant visibility of points of view Other than those of the government is essential: that people write, speak and, to the extent that they can, teach history as a human science. What adds to its viability is that ours is a multicultural society and there are many segments who will want their role to be reflected in the histories that are going to be written. Currently there is ongoing research into hitherto neglected aspects such as gender history, Dalit history and ecological history- The integration of this work into the discipline of history will require that it be reflected in history textbooks. I think history will survive, because it is so essential for people to understand themselves and their past, whether as a society or as individuals. In the same way as biography survives, history will also survive.

Based on an interview by Kum Kum Roy

Ela R. Bhatt (b. 1933) has become synonymous with *She Self-Employed Women's Association*, an organisation of the poorest working women in Ahmedabad that she founded in 1972. She began her career as a trade unionist in the Textile Labour Association (Ahmedabad) and has held important positions in a number of important organisations and institutions in the course of her work. These include the Indian Institute of Management (Ahmedabad); Friends of Women's World Banking, India; National Commission on Labour; Asia Society, New York; International Coalition of Women and Credit, New York; World Commission on Urban Future, Berlin; STREET NET: International Alliance of Street Vendors; WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalising Organising), Boston; and Women's World Banking, New York. She is the Founder General Secretary, SEWA and Founder Chair, SEWA Co-operative Bank.

Dr. Bhatt has written extensively, in English and Gujarati, on working women, and her list of honours is long and distinguished. In 1977 she won the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership; the Susan B. Anthony Award for National Integration in 1982; the Right Livelihood Award for Changing the Human Environment in 1984; the CARE Humanitarian Award in 1994; and the Asia Society Award for Builder of Bridges between Asians and Americans in 2000. These are only a few—she was also awarded the Padma Shri in 1985; the Padma Bhushan in 1986; Vishwa Gurjari in 1996; and the Yashwantrao Chavan Award for National Integration in 1999. She is the recipient of at least six honorary degrees

including from SNDT University, Bombay (1991); Haverford College, USA (1993); St. Francis Xavier University, Canada (1999); and Harvard University, USA (2001).

One of India's most distinguished citizens, Dr. Bhatt has been of the Planning Commission of India, as well as of the Rajya Sabha.



Organising for Change

ELA R. BHATT

How does one tell the story of one's life? From a span of almost seven decades of a life lived very intensely, what shall I choose? At least, I know where to begin: with my birth.

I was born on September 7, 1933, into a Nagar Brahmin family in Ahmedabad. My mother, Vanalila Vyas, was the daughter of Dr. Manidhar Prasad, who joined the freedom movement in answer to Gandhiji's call. My grandfather had taken part in the Dandi March, also known as the Salt Satyagraha, joining up in 1930 in one of the first teams that dared the British Empire to tax common salt. My father's father was a lawyer, a government pleader, not given to nationalistic sentiment, but socially and culturally, the two families shared a great deal and a marriage was arranged between Vanalila and Sumant Bhatt. As it turned out, the influences from my mother's family finally determined the choices that I made for my vocation.

I grew up in a large house in the old part of Surat. Our home was fairly close to the house of the state Congress party president. As is well known, the Congress party was the political group that was in the thick of the struggle to free the country from the shackles of the British Empire. Across the street from our home was a printing press, which ostensibly published children's books. Much as I wanted to, I was not allowed to go there and pick up books to read or to see what they were printing. Later, I found out that the press printed pamphlets and newsletters for those who were

protesting British rule and were largely underground for fear of being arrested for sedition. We saw quite a lot of political activity in our neighbourhood in the cause of India's freedom, and also its suppression by the British.

My mother had to discontinue school at an early age in order to get married. She resented that and took every opportunity to study on her own. She also made the decision to send her own daughters to university. My mother wrote poems and ghazals, often reciting them at poetry reading sessions held for the public in the evenings. My father was a lawyer, as was his brother. Our two families would spend the long summer vacations (when courts and schools were closed), travelling to the seashore, hill-stations or forests. My father would spend long evenings with us, encouraging us to memorize his favourite poems. I think he wanted to inculcate a love of English literature in us, but even more earnestly, a moral education that would last us a lifetime. Our parents were also very keen that we should do well at school. My enthusiasm to respond can be gauged by the fact that we would buy the textbooks for the next class at the beginning of the summer vacation, and before the school term started I would have finished reading them all!

On August 15, 1947, India became independent. I was 14 years old and had just graduated from high school. I got admitted to college, acquired a new bicycle and began to realize the dimensions of my own independence. I particularly enjoyed my classes in Gujarati and English poetry, and apart from the formal courses I learnt charcoal drawing, photography and music.

When I was in my second year of college, independent India's first Census was about to begin. Members of the Youth Congress were asked to help in conducting field tests in selected samples; that is when I met Ramesh Bhatt for the first time. He was energetic and handsome, an obvious leader. Many of us became willing followers, cycling with him to the slums of Surat where each of us had to collect data from 65 households. I was stunned by the minimal housing and living levels of the inhabitants. The sampling exercise for the Census was my first contact with poverty. I did not know it then, but I can say with the wisdom of hindsight that it was a turning point in my life.

My parents disapproved of my going into the slums and meeting families of the working class, but they did not quite know how to curb me. In the course of working together, Ramesh and I became fond of each other and we decided to get married. This was a shock to my parents. They opposed the match on the grounds that Ramesh came from a poor family and was the son

of a textile worker. It was bad enough that I was always talking about the problems of the poor, but to be so brazen as to select a partner who was not from the same economic class was something my parents could not accept. My father asked me, “What do you know about poverty?” and I felt that I had to have first-hand knowledge of it. As an experiment with myself, I chose to live in a village near Surat on Rs. 60 p.m. for a whole year, to understand the experience of poverty, but at the back of my mind *was* the thought that I was trying to prove to myself that I could live very simply.

After finishing my law degree in 1955, I applied for a job with the Textile Labour Association (TLA) in Ahmedabad. The TLA had been set up by Anasuyaben Sarabhai, Shankarlal Banker and Mahatma Gandhi. It was an association that already had a reputation for settling disputes through discussions. I was hesitant and nervous when I started working, but I did manage to present some cases at court on behalf of labour. Later, TLA started a women’s wing and I was put in charge of it. Among the first things I did was to visit the slums where the women lived. I went everywhere on my Lambretta. In those days, it was unusual to see a woman riding a scooter so, unwittingly; I attracted a lot of attention. However, the job gave me a chance to visit the women in their homes and to understand their specific problems.

In 1956 Ramesh Bhatt got a master’s degree in both economics and law. My parents were impressed and finally approved of my choice. We were married on April 20, 1956. Even though I insisted on wearing a white *khadi sari* with a red border and wore no jewellery except the traditional ivory bangle, my parents had a lavish celebration. After our marriage, for two years we lived in a house on the campus of *Gujarat Vidyapith* where Ramesh had a teaching job. We lived very simply, in a Gandhian way. I continued my work at the TLA until two months before the birth of my first child, a daughter we called Amimayi, in January 1958 and a son, Mihir, born in November 1959. My husband and I enjoyed their early years, sharing their care and the tasks of the household.

In 1960, Bombay Presidency was divided into Maharashtra and Gujarat, which resulted in more government jobs becoming available. I applied for the post of assistant employment officer and was selected. I had a staff of three and my job was to set up an employment guidance bureau at Gujarat University. I tried to find placements for new graduates and I think I succeeded. After three years, I was transferred to the head office and given the post of occupational information officer. I had to field test the definitions of new occupations. I watched people at work and noted down their work

operations in detail. Although it gave me a chance to travel and to be out in the real world, I found bureaucratic procedures a bit restricting, so I gave up my job to help the TLA prepare for the Indian National Trade Union Congress to be held in Ahmedabad in July 1968.

Two major events propelled me into the vocation I eventually chose. The first was the closing of two major textile mills in 1968. The men who were laid off were organizing protests. Their wives did a variety of jobs as loaders, vendors, tailors, housemaids and so on. I realized that the informal sector had no work security, insurance or even an entry in any register as “labour”. They were nameless and faceless as far as the state was concerned, and yet the women worked at a variety of tasks and managed to feed the family.

The second event was a communal riot in Ahmedabad. In 1969, there was a major crisis: tension and riots between Hindus and Muslims. At that time, TLA members were allowed to go out to restore peace so I went with some others to affected areas. One night we saw bleeding corpses in the curfew areas. I helped to put the bodies onto a military truck to be taken to the public crematorium. It was my first contact with the horror of violent death. As part of TLA work, I also visited women victims in the hospitals and found that many of them were Muslims. I spent a lot of my time helping the women find their lost relatives and start building their lives again. Many families had lost their homes and their jobs and were desperately poor.

In the course of my survey work, I noted that there were thousands of women recycling waste cloth, making bidis, collecting scrap, stitching, vending vegetables and pulling carts. These jobs went unrecognized and earned them pitiful amounts. They were constantly borrowing money at exorbitant rates of interest, just to keep going. Just as I was feeling weighed down by the enormous burdens that women carried in their daily lives, I got a chance to attend a training programme in Israel offered by their national labour union, *Histadrut*. I saw how labour unions could also act as cooperatives. In Israel, banking, health-care, transport, even the airlines, were operated by union members through their cooperatives. I felt excited by the thought that I could begin to organize the women I had seen, unionizing them not only *against* someone, but also *for* themselves. This visit provided me with the vital thrust I needed for the next stage of my work.

My first attempt at organizing was successful, possibly a matter of beginner’s luck. I found that head-loaders were paid a pittance and I wrote an article about it in the newspaper. The merchants stoutly denied the low

wage, insisting that they were paying four times as much and printing the supposed rates in the paper. I printed those rates on cards and gave one card to each worker. Since they had been printed in the newspaper, the merchants could not go back on their rates. Effectively, the wages for head-loading went up.

The next group was that of women who sold used garments. I organized a meeting with them and they willingly paid a membership fee of Rs. 3 per year. That was the beginning of the Self-Employed Women's Association. There were many hurdles to cross, but we registered SEWA as a labour union on April 12, 1972, with the help of the TLA. To start with, we surveyed eight urban trades, with investigators from their own communities. The survey process itself generated the leaders and organisers. I wrote up our survey data and it was published by the TLA. The core problem became apparent: the workers did not own their tools and they had no access to capital.

The idea of having our own bank came from one of our workers, Chandaben (Chanda Papu). It was an uphill task, but we did start a cooperative bank called Manila SEWA Sahakari Bank Ltd. in May 1974. We created bank pass-books with photographs for identity, as many of the women were not literate. However, many of them insisted on learning to sign their own names and thus, banking led to literacy. Since the women found it difficult to come to the bank, our field workers went to their work place, collected their savings and made their entries for them.

Another innovation was making the trade group responsible for the approval and return of loans. We formed a board of trustees with members representing different trades, and myself. Since we knew the conditions under which the women lived, we were able to take bigger risks than regular banks. Today, our bank adjoins the *Banque du Paris* in a multi-storey building in Ahmedabad, and we conduct an enormous quantum of business with our women members, both literate and non-literate.

In 1976, we started organizing in the rural areas. The problems were different and we had to learn how to help handle them. We found that the women who depended solely on their income as agricultural labour were more impoverished than those who had skills. So we decided to upgrade their weaving skills with the expertise of the National Institute of Design, and their dairy skills with help from the National Dairy Development Board. We created a rotating fund to help the women buy cattle. In 1978, I went to the University of Sussex to attend a course, and a paper I presented there got

the attention of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other international bodies.

In 1977, I received the Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership. This was a boost for the activities of SEWA, but it shifted our movement further away from the TLA, our parent organization. There were many who resented the public attention that SEWA was getting. I was also bolder, and took a strong position on the cause of dalits concerning the reservation of two seats for SC/ST students in the post-graduate medical college in Gujarat. The majority of the student body was protesting the reservation while I supported it in public. This received a great deal of notice in the media. There was a lot of hostility from middle class families, including those in our neighbourhood, and once even our house was stoned. The TLA felt that I had overstepped my bounds. Finally, I was literally asked to leave my office in the TLA, and SEWA was disaffiliated from the National Labour Organization. I am putting it simply, but it was a heart-wrenching experience. However, in handling the crisis, we at SEWA came of age.

In the Eighties, SEWA's membership grew rapidly, from about 6000 in 1981 to 23,000 in 1984. We increased our office space, invited outside experts to tone up the administration and to strengthen the union structure. Six major trades formed the union in those days: textile and garment workers; bidi rollers; head-loaders and cart-pullers; cleaners; vendors and agricultural workers. They elected their leaders from among themselves. All issues would be discussed openly and the women were vociferous in expressing their views. One of the issues, possibly the stormiest one, was whether men could also be admitted as members of SEWA. Whenever I brought up the question it was turned down unanimously! The women felt that the presence of men from their own families would be a hindrance to their active participation. SEWA has thus retained its strong identity as a women's organization and a voice that has been heard in many a forum, national and international.

One of the outcomes of my work was its appeal to an enlightened public around the world. In 1984, I was given the Right Livelihood Award for changing the human environment. It is an award that is referred to as the Alternate Nobel Prize. Following these awards, the Government of India awarded me a Padmashri in 1985 and a Padmabhushan in 1986. Other honours came from France, the U.S. and even from the Ahmedabad Municipality! I appreciated the recognition that my work derived from these awards and the increasing visibility of women workers, but I have never felt excited by the awards themselves; rather, I felt nervous when I went to

receive them. Sometimes I even had the feeling of being isolated from my peer group because of the awards.

In 1987 I was invited by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to become a member of the Rajya Sabha. The same year, a National Commission on Self-Employed Women was set up by the Prime Minister and I was appointed its chair. My work for the Commission took me to all the states of India. We met government officials, voluntary organizations and working women themselves. The hardships and deprivation suffered by poor women were not new to me, but to find them so widespread, the laws and statutes so unresponsive to their needs, and those in power, so exploitative—that was the hard reality. Our report *Shram Shakti*, was submitted in 1988. A number of recommendations were made—that women should have at least part ownership and control of economic production; and that a central social security fund be created for women in the unorganized sector. It was envisaged that this fund would provide for maternity benefits, health services and child-care facilities. These recommendations constituted my agenda for the next decade.

I returned to Ahmedabad in 1991. SEWA had grown, not only in the number of new members, but in terms of new programmes and lively leadership on several fronts. There was Video SEWA. It began with a group of SEWA women receiving video training; they took extraordinarily sensitive pictures of their own lives, taped the life stories of women, and documented events and working conditions. The video camera became a powerful social tool in their hands. An institution that we call SEWA Academy was set up, which undertook the task of educating new members about SEWA and the strength and clout of collective action and thinking.

Among our many struggles, an important one has been for the rights of home-based workers. It was an uphill task to get the issue discussed at an international forum. On June 20, 1996, the International Labour Organization adopted the Convention on Home Work. For SEWA, it was the culmination of 16 years of campaigning which we termed “From Hawabibi to ILO Geneva Convention”.

Hawabibi was a bidi worker in SEWA’s early years. It was a landmark event, a victory and a vindication of the trust we reposed in collective action.

Women’s World Banking was an idea born in 1975 at the Women’s Conference in Mexico. It was set up in 1979 and it grew into an efficient worldwide organization that acted as a broker and guaranteed loans to poor women. Apart from access to capital, expertise in business was also made

available to the women. They were able to utilize markets, information-technology and support services. I had been on the executive committee from its inception and served as Chair of WWB from 1988 for a period of ten years. Next only to SEWA, WWB is an organization that I have identified with and felt close to.

When V.P. Singh became Prime Minister, I was invited to join the Planning Commission and given the portfolio for employment and labour. Not being an academic economist, getting my colleagues to recognize and accept that skills and productivity could exist outside the market economy, was the first step. The government did not last long enough for us to see our plans through. I struggled to get my colleagues to accept that convergence of services was essential, but my point was not accorded much attention in the Plan document. I found later that UNICEF had included it in its five year plan.

The ideology and organizing of SEWA began to have impact in many parts of the world. I was constantly travelling, explaining the constructive work we were doing on Gandhian lines and the movement for, with, and by women. I am currently the Chair of three important international alliances and networks: STREETNET, HOMENET and WIEGO. I even managed to get the Rockefeller Foundation, of which I am a trustee, to hold an international meeting of street vendors at its prestigious Conference Centre in Bellagio, Italy.

In the last decade, the academic world has also begun to recognize my contribution. I have been honoured with honorary doctorates from two Indian universities, SNDT University and M.S. University, and four foreign ones: Haverford College, Temple University, St. Francis Xavier University and Harvard University. Whenever I am awarded I think of all the women who have worked with me, and am gratified that I have inducted and trained a large cadre of workers, including quite a few who will lead SEWA into the future.

India attained political freedom in 1947. I think that we now have to work for a second freedom, that of economic empowerment for the toiling poor of our country. I keep thinking of strategies to achieve it. Today, SEWA has a membership of 3, 18, 527 self-employed women workers. Small-scale producers, vendors, service providers and workers in milk production, handloom or agriculture constitute several million of people, and yet they are undocumented and unrecognized. I have termed these vast numbers the "People Sector" since they are neither in the public nor private sectors. About 92 per cent of India's total workforce is in the People Sector. A recent

study by NCAER mentions that “63 per cent of GDP, 55 per cent of savings and 47 per cent of exports are accounted for by the informal sector;” and as you know, this sector is made up largely of women. In the world of work the overlap of women, poverty and informality is obvious. Sometimes people ask me whether SEWA is pro-state or pro-market. My answer is, clearly, that SEWA is pro-poor. Our aim is to empower the poor with skills in their craft and trade, in the management of resources, and in dealing with the technicalities of the market; our work will see its completion when there is full employment and self-reliance for all the workers in the informal sector.

I would like to end my life story with a reiteration of my strong belief in Gandhiji’s concept of trusteeship. He suggests that neither talent nor wealth is entitled to the unrestricted enjoyment of its rewards, but should be held as a public trust. This may seem unrealistic at first glance, but there are examples even in recent history of altruism, willingness to share, to give and even to renounce. It is possible even in the materialistic world of today, to have ideals of equity and social justice and to live a life that values achievement, dignity and happiness.

Based on an interview by S. Anandlakshmi

Padma Ramachandran (b. 1934) was the first woman to join the Indian Administrative Service in the early 1950s, and retired as Chief Secretary to the Government of Kerala. Other important assignments have included Vice-Chancellor, M.S. University of Baroda; the coveted post of Director, Asia and Pacific Centre for Women and Development, Bangkok; and Director, Institute of Management in Government, Trivandrum. She is currently President of the institute of Urban and Regional Development, Trivandrum; she was awarded a UNDP Human Rights Fellowship in 1976 to study women’s rights in Kenya and Sri Lanka.



Me and My Work

PADMA RAMACHANDRAN

I was born the fifth girl, and sixth and last child, in a South Indian family which belonged to a rather conservative community of Tirunelveli Iyers. My father was probably amongst the first few Tamilians who ventured north of the Vindhyas in search of a living. He had wanted very much to be in the civil service but was not allowed to write the Indian Civil Service examination, as passing it meant that he would have to cross the seven seas for his training—that was taboo in those days. He vowed that his children would do what he was not permitted to, but alas, he had only one son and I was born thereafter as the last child. How he wished that I was also a boy! In those days, not only did very few women graduate and enter the portals, let alone the higher echelons, of administration, there was little or no chance for them to escape the destiny of marriage—and early marriage at that, preferably before the onset of puberty—which meant dowry and a variety and volume of contemptuous remarks invariably intended for the bride's parents. None of my sisters was lucky enough to go to college, and if I was to go in for higher studies it meant I would have to stay in a hostel. I must acknowledge that times and attitudes towards girls' education were changing—certainly my luck was. I joined the Intermediate Course in Madras where my brother was also a student. It was a great feeling to be in a hostel and study in a women's college but it did not offer a B.A. Honours degree in Economics, which I would take later in a co-educational college. I can only be grateful to my broadminded parents and my father's single-minded goal for me to enter the civil service, which enabled me to pursue this course. In those early years after Independence, the names of all successful candidates would be announced on the radio, especially the one, two or three women who had made it. We were two in my year, out of a total of 67 or 68, surprisingly from the same college and the same orthodox community of Iyers! You can imagine the pride and joy my parents, particularly my father, felt when my name was announced.

During the one-year probation at Metcalfe House in Delhi, we had a lot of physical activity such as horse-riding and training with the police in Mount Abu, and with the army in Kashmir. The two of us had to go through the same mill as the boys, but we were actually more enthusiastic and better skilled in mountain-climbing and horticulture. Furthermore, we felt we had

to be as good as, if not better than the boys, for in those days we had to be twice as good to be reckoned as at least half as good. The time was not ripe then for anyone to declare that what others could do, we could do better—it simply had to be demonstrated! We did not have the same problems as Anna George, the first and only woman to enter the Indian Administrative Service in 1951, had—she recounted to us that once, when she was in hospital for a week, she had a hard time finding someone who could get her, her clothes from Metcalfe House! There were many volunteers but none of them would have been suitable!

While I was on probation, an interesting thing happened related to our allotment to the state cadre. In my application I had put my first choice down as Madras state, having spent quite a lot of my childhood and teenage years away from it. Normally, a girl was allowed the ‘privilege’ of getting her first choice: was it some kind of affirmative action, a protective measure? I cannot say. I did not get Madras because it went to Satyabhama whose rank was higher than mine, but was allotted to Bombay, my second preference. States Reorganization had just taken place and Bombay State was bifurcated into Gujarat and Maharashtra. The two of us who had been allotted to Bombay both wanted Maharashtra—in this case, however, lots were to be drawn as there was no question of the lady getting her choice automatically!] was asked by the Principal of the Training School whether I would be interested in Kerala state—which had been formed in November 1956 as part of the Reorganization of States—as there was a vacancy there. Without further ado I said yes, because I wanted to serve in South India. Soon thereafter the Home Minister of India sent for me. I was terrified, not knowing what I was being summoned for. I appeared before the mighty Goviind Vallabh Pant. Who was shaking more, I cannot tell—me, out of fear, or he, from injuries received during the freedom struggle. “Have you agreed to go to Kerala?” he asked and when I said yes, he continued, “Don’t you know it is a Communist-ruled state—how can we risk sending you there?” I do not know how I had the courage to reply to him, for I hadn’t taken a single momentous decision in my life prior to this, and I was not quite sure how to defend it. I simply said that having taken the decision to go to Kerala, I would like to stick to it—any state was as good or bad as any other and, hopefully, no occasion would arise for the Government of India to bail me out. He was somewhat disappointed with my reply, I think, for he said, “Young lady, don’t tell me later that I didn’t warn you.” The truth of the matter was that the government was jittery about sending a girl to unknown and untested waters where a Communist ministry under Namboodiripad

(EMS as he was affectionately known) had come in for the first time. I was sure to drown. Later, I did wonder whether I had made the right choice but today, nine years after retirement, I have no regrets. I feel that there are challenges everywhere and Kerala had enough and more for me.

When I was to be posted as district collector, the state government was very hesitant, not having had a woman on their hands before. They kept parrying the decision for as long as possible. Whenever I made enquiries with the chief secretary's office, I was told that a month's vacancy would soon arise, as the incumbent collector was going on leave. I had to make it clear that I was asking for a regular vacancy, not a leave vacancy. Finally, it was only when I went up to the governor and told him the position (it was President's Rule in Kerala at the time) that I was given a regular posting, though they did not dare to send me out of sight to another district!

Those were the difficult days of food shortage in Kerala, Local procurement of grain by the government was never enough and even today, Kerala produces only one-third of rice, vegetables and other food it requires. Supplies come from neighbouring states. Meanwhile, there was trouble brewing in the district because of lack of food. Students were out on the streets to demonstrate their anger against the central government. We held many appeasement meetings with different groups, making a special effort to cultivate the goodwill of all parties and sections of people. Many student leaders were my friends and had promised me that they would not create any trouble. But they were allergic to the police. I had told them I would follow their rules strictly if they followed mine, namely that there was to be no destruction of public property. Some provocation, allegedly by the police, made them burn a bus and I had to go and talk to them. The police commissioner, a well-meaning man who thought it was his duty to protect me, suddenly ran up to me as I was approaching the students, and started walking along with me. The students felt I had betrayed them. Soon there was a rain of stones hurled at us, tar tins were set on fire and more would have happened had we not started tear-gassing the students. They vanished into thin air. I felt deeply hurt by the turn of events. Luckily, not too much damage was done, but a lot of questions were asked: why hadn't the collector ordered firing at the unruly mob? The director general of police, that obnoxious character who had always resented my refusal to let him interfere in the district, accused me of being too soft and not knowing how to administer—I should have taken sterner action. Only I knew that no one in that situation could order a firing against students. The dust never really settled down, but I was sure of one thing—though my bosses may have been

dissatisfied with me, the people of Trivandrum were with me, which I feel is the true test of an administrator.

I enjoyed the one and a half years I worked as district collector because it gave me a key-hole view of what administration and serving people really means. I had to go to houses where lightning had struck, and offer solace and compensation; I had to obtain gold from the affluent for the Gold Bond drive; I had a chance to handle flood relief as well as drought relief; I met a variety of people and looked after different kinds of situations—from a ration shop on fire to prevention of communal frenzy. A collector has to be ever ready to tackle calamities and emergencies. The government of India likes to call this “performing at the cutting edge”—that is, in close proximity to the people, when you experience the emotions and feelings of joy and sorrow of common people especially those less fortunate than yourself. There was a great deal that I could do as collector, even though my time was not my own and my children, who were very young then, demanded full-time attention. But I was able to cope, because of my mother’s presence in the house and trusted home-help.

In 1974 I came to know about *Towards Equality*, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, and asked to be sent to the Department of Social Welfare so that I could process it. Though many people thought I was foolish in asking for a position in the Department of Social Welfare (they seemed to think that there was neither glamour nor a foreign trip in that department, nor did it require much intelligence to work there), it was a turning point for me. Ever since that assignment, I have been on a voyage of discovery in the field of women’s issues, and with that background I could do plenty when I was appointed Vice-Chancellor of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in 1995. It was a difficult administrative job, dealing with the academic world with no money whatsoever for trying out anything new or innovative, but I’m happy to say that I was able to raise crores of rupees in cash and kind for research and action projects. And yes, we had a marked pro-women orientation in the way we administered.

Did I have to speak up for my rights at any point during my career? During the earlier part when it was my turn to be deputed for foreign training, my name was bypassed because I had already gone abroad with my husband! I had to explain the difference between going as the wife of my husband, and doing a study programme on my own and being deputed in my own right! A sulky chief secretary finally agreed after much delay. Then there was the occasion, when I was health secretary, when a new minister

who was Catholic took charge and told me that I should not submit any files related to family planning to him. Next, he asked for my transfer out of the health department, saying he would not be able to deal with a woman secretary. Since no other secretary-level post was vacant, a way had to be found to accommodate me—the education department was bifurcated into two, higher and school education, and I was posted to the latter! Finally, after I had completed ten months as chief secretary in 1992, central and state elections took place. An incoming government and its chief minister made it clear that they wanted their man as chief secretary—and I had to rehabilitate myself at the centre. But these are the hazards of my profession – whether one is man or woman – that under the guise of selection postings the preference of a chief minister cannot be questioned. Many were aware, however, that the CM's view was that it was not very convenient to have a woman chief secretary.

In my days, when the climate was anything but pro-woman, we were considered only for posts related to social welfare and education, not finance or industry. Education, training, management and women—these were my areas of specialization and I loved them, but I would have been happy to be trained in the so-called “tough” areas of planning and finance. In 1981, after my return from Bangkok, I was shunted out from the secretariat to an embryo institute for training civil servants. At that time there were no takers for this job. I spent nine happy years there, experimenting with new ways of doing training, and I was particularly happy that I *was* able to introduce women as an issue in every single training course. We established a day-care centre in the Institute to encourage women to come for training—support services like this are essential for women to be able to take advantage of opportunities coming their way.

Today, much water has flowed under the bridge and women are present in much greater numbers in the civil services. Knowledge, a strong moral fibre, emotional strength and courage have to be gained and cultivated to survive in this profession, for one has to deal with politicians all the time. The good work of administrators is seldom visible, but people tend to notice faults and mistakes, sometimes exaggerated. At the most, people may say on retirement, that here indeed was a good officer and a fair and just person, in my view that is more valuable than bouquets or governmental recognition.

Sai Paranjpye (b.1936) is an award-winning Marathi playwright, theatre personality and film-maker who has worked in the Hindi and Marathi film industry and television, making feature-length films, serials, documentaries and featurettes. She has written books for children, is co-founder of the Children's Theatre in Pune, and is currently Chairperson of the Children's Film Society of India. Her work includes the Hindi films, Sparsh (1979) Chashme Baddoor (1981) and Saaz (1997); the featurettes, Beggar, Angootha Chhap and Choodiyan; the children's films, Sikandar (1973) and Jadoo ka Shankh (1971); the documentaries, The Little Tea Shop and Books that Talk (1976); and the television serials, Ados Pados, Hum Panchhi ek Chawl Ke and Behna. Her writings include Zhalee kay Gammat, Jadoo ka Shankh, and Shepticha Shaap (plays for children) and Jaswandi and Mazha Khel Mandu De (Marathi plays).



Floodgates

SAI PARANJPYE

I was very fortunate to be the daughter of a woman who was herself an achiever. Outstanding and dynamic my mother, Shakuntala Paranjpye, got her mathematics degree from Cambridge at a time when girls seldom finished their school-leaving exams. She propagated family planning when the topic was taboo in polite society (and was honoured with a Padma Bhushan for her pioneering work), and battled social prejudices and evils especially against women and the under-privileged. Mother lived by her own rules. She married a white Russian (my father) during her stint in ILO, Geneva; and after a brief marriage got a divorce and returned to stay with her father Sir R.P. Paranjpye, the famous mathematician, rationalist, social reformer and educationist. I am afraid this “name-dropping” is inevitable if I am to record my early grooming.

My mother and grandfather brought me up. Whatever I am, whatever I have achieved is entirely because of them. In fact my mother's "raison d'être" seemed to be to raise me. This was taxing at times, as her perception of my talents was all-pervasive, and often unfounded. I had to learn classical vocal music from age 6 to age 9, from the renowned Mirashi Bua in Pune. A whole hour every morning for three years! My day of deliverance came when Bua told Mummy with folded hands, "It is useless, Madam, little Sai cannot sing in tune."

The creative being in me was discovered at the bedtime-story stage. Mummy told me a new story every night. One day (or night) she said, "You tell me a story today," and I did. A long yarn spun out with exotic characters. "Not bad", she said" when I finished, "who told it to you?" "No one", I said, "I made it up." That was my undoing! From that day onwards, I had to write three pages of "literature"—an essay or a short story, before I could go out to play. My literary creations resulted in a proper book, published when I was all of eight years old. I often wonder how many talented children there are out there who are not as fortunate to have a mother support their every flight of fancy!

Being half Russian, I looked very different from most Indian children. To be a child of divorced parents in those days was a matter for juicy speculation. I was promised bars of chocolate to talk about my father and answer questions. I still remember those horrible inquisitive busy-bodies with probing eyes. This hangover from my childhood has remained with me—I retire into a shell when strangers accost me with well-meant but personal questions.

I had the best of both worlds, thanks to Mother and Appa. Appa was India's first High Commissioner to Australia, so for four years I was exposed to a completely western way of life. I became a little Aussie in no time in that warm and friendly country. I saw the latest Hollywood fare, marvelled at splendid stage musicals, read comics alongside the classics, and sang "Waltzing Matilda" with great gusto. To counter this I had to talk in Marathi at home, and write the obligatory three pages both in English and Marathi. It was tough. On top of it, I was given *a* sound grooming in Sanskrit, and had learnt the Ramraksha and many other *stotras* and *subhashitas* by heart. If challenged, I can rattle off the tongue-twisting Shiva Stotra written by Ravana to this day! This passion for Sanskrit hymns in an atheist family was somewhat strange—but then we were a very strange family!

I had read Swift, Scott, Jane Austin, Hardy and Charles Dickens before I was twelve. And of course all the eminent Marathi authors—Hari Narayan Apte, Sane Guruji, Khandekar, and so on. Mother was a stickler for languages and for preserving their chastity. She was “Mummy” when we talked in English and “*Aie*” when we resorted to Marathi. I was fined four annas (so was she) for using an English word when talking in Marathi. I shudder to think how she would react to today’s *khichdi* languages. Appa, the son of the village priest in small town Anjarle in Konkan, read John Stuart Mill while in England and returned home a confirmed rationalist and atheist. He was not allowed to sit at the family dinner table, and had his meals alone in the courtyard.

I have yet to encounter a more saintly man. Education was his mission, and after returning triumphantly from Cambridge as India’s first Senior Wrangler and being wooed for all kinds of plum jobs in the country, he devoted his life to the Fergusson College and served as its principal on a salary of Rs. 150 a month—which even in those days, was peanuts for a man of his stature. He was unshakeable in his values. The roof nearly flew off one day as he raged at my grandmother for using his college stationery to pen a personal letter! This sounds amusing in today’s context when most politicians are holding the country to ransom for personal gain.

Appa did not believe in landed property, and had told Mummy and me that he would be leaving his modest bank balance and property to Fergusson College. After his death, someone advised Mummy to file a case for custody of the house that Appa had willed to Fergusson. “How dare you suggest this to me?” she flared. “I know and respect his wishes, and would never dream of demeaning his memory.” Fergusson College in turn graciously allowed her to stay on the ground floor during her lifetime, and I too have a portion of the ground floor of the beloved “Purushottamahram”, courtesy the College.

Unfortunately I did not inherit an iota of the Paranjpye brilliance in the brains department. I barely scraped through algebra, geometry and arithmetic; till date figures stand firmly in the enemy camp. Appa would try to teach me, but the more he taught, the more befuddled I became. I did well in languages, however, and also in history, where I could let my imagination run riot. Appa had been a crusader for girls’ education. Indeed he was the protege and first cousin of the great Bharat Ratna Maharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve (more name-dropping!). Bal Gangadhar Tilak opposed education for girls and thought that their place was at home. Someone told me that Tilak was pelted with rotten tomatoes at an open forum when the two giants—he

and Appa—debated the issue. I asked Appa about it. “True,” he smiled, “but so was I pelted with rotten eggs by the opposite camp!”

In college—Fergusson naturally—I passed four magical years discovering myself and a brand new world. No one expected me to shine academically, and I did not. I took part in every stage activity that presented itself, and directed one-act plays for the intercollegiate drama competitions, four years running. Fergusson usually stuck to Marathi plays. I dug up *Dear Departed* which I directed and acted in. Just as different groups were getting ready for the event, the boys from Wadia College strolled up to our troupe. When they learnt that we were doing an English play, they broke into loud guffaws. We had the last laugh however, when *Dear Departed* won over *Othello*. Our team won the Best Play award, and I bagged the Best Actress award. To his credit, the director of *Othello* came up and saluted us smartly when the awards were announced.

I was the first girl in college to be elected to the general post of Drama Secretary—I refused to stand for “Ladies Representative”—and won with a huge majority over my male opponents. The next year, however, I lost with an equally impressive margin—the boys wanted to leach me a lesson! I can distinctly remember the day it was decided that I would become a film-maker. A family friend, Achyut Kanade, used to herald me to the top of Fergusson College hill every morning. Achyut Mama was a respected film-maker. (He introduced Balraj Sahni in his film, *Gudiya*) Our morning walks were immensely enjoyable as he would tell me a new film story every day. His stories unfolded like films and were most absorbing. I still remember *Wuthering Heights*, *Gas Light*, *The Good Earth* and so on. One day he told me the story of Ramjoshi, a current Marathi hit. Ramjoshi became alcoholic and his career was threatened. He swore never to touch a drop again. “We see him pacing restlessly in his chambers,” narrated Achyut Mama. “We see his feet, his fine muslin dhoti trailing on the marble floor. Somehow, the nozzle of the ornate surai gets caught in his dhoti and gets dragged along as he walks.” I was immensely impressed with the power of a strong visual to convey a concept eloquently, without the use of the spoken word. I still vividly remember the scene as seen by my mind’s eye, and my subsequent disappointment when I later saw the actual film. I like to think that my version was more dramatic. Perhaps I flatter myself. The fact is that I owe my emergence as a script-writer and director in no small measure to Achyut Mama.

My career as a media woman began with All India Radio, Pune. It was one of those bizarre accidents in life which determine the course of one’s

destiny. With my B.A. exam just a fortnight away, I was still gloriously uncertain as to what I was going to do in life. One morning, a uniformed peon arrived at the door with an official looking brown envelope. I was called for auditions for Marathi announcements as there was a crisis at the radio station. Why I was called, and by whom, I will never know⁷. I went anyway for the fun of it, and got through the tongue-twisting text with great ease, thanks to my Sanskrit grooming. As I stepped out of the studio door the duty officer said, "Join from tomorrow." Politely expressing regret in the face of my approaching exams I headed for the gate. A peon ran after me. I was called for an audition again, this time for English announcements. They were really desperate! To cut a long story short, I joined Pune AIR as the English announcer, a five-minute evening affair when the daily local bulletin had to be read out. I would cycle to the Central Buildings every day for this tryst and was paid Rs. 50 per month for this job. Before long my exams were over and I started doing Marathi announcements as well, and compeering the children's programme, "Balodyan". Those radio clays were really magic, where I learnt as I earned, and had a lot of fun, too.

During the annual Radio Week, music concerts and stage plays were broadcast live. I wrote and directed a string of children's plays which were later published in book form, *Pattenagareet*, *Shepticha Shaap*, *Bhatkyache Bhavishya*, *Zhalee Kay Gammatt* and *Jadoo ka Shankli* to name a few. I am happy to say that five of my books won government awards, both centre and state. Unwittingly, I became a writer of children's plays thanks to the Radio, and all my plays are performed in schools all over Maharashtra, even today.

It seemed a waste of time, effort and energy to have just a single performance of a play during Radio Week, and then call it curtains. So the Children's Theatre of Poona was born. We already had the plays, child actors, director and lots of enthusiasm. What we did not have was money. Gopinath Talwalkar became the president of the Group and Arun Joglekar and I, its secretaries. We announced my *Land of Cards* (not to be confused with the Tagore play) as our opening venture. It was a colourful extravaganza with kids wearing large playing cards, and four sets of kings and queens in full regalia. We needed a lot of stiff buckram and white poplin for the playing cards, yards and yards of the stuff. I remember going to different shops on Laxmi Road and announcing grandly that I was Wrangler Paranjpye's granddaughter, launching a fantastic children's play and could I please buy yards of material "on credit?" The money would be paid as soon as our shows were held. Believe it or not, my audacity paid. Either because

of my persuasive powers, or because of the city's reverence for Appa, we were able to "buy" whatever was required to mount the play.

I sincerely intended to pay back every penny to the kind-hearted Laxmi Road shopkeepers—the fact that the play might flop and not make money never occurred to me! Luckily, the shows were a grand success and our credit was cleared in no time—and Appa was none the wiser about his unique contribution to the cause of Children's Theatre in Pune. Our little theatre group did exceedingly well, and when Pandit Nehru turned up for *Land of Cards* we thought we had really arrived!

Inevitably, Arun and I formed an attachment because we both shared the same passion for theatre. We got married. Appa and Mummy were disappointed with the match, but Appa gave his blessings. Mother did not. Soon after I got a scholarship to study at the National School of Drama in Delhi, and bid adieu to Pune. The Children's Theatre folded up. Arun too got a scholarship the following year, and we both settled down to an enriching new learning experience in Delhi.

The NSD was fairly directionless till Ebrahim Alkazi joined as Director when I was in the second and final year. In just one year, Alkazi was able to impart to us a priceless legacy in theatre. His vision, erudition, passion, eloquence and the sheer magnetic force of his many-splendoured personality cast a spell over his students. Alkazi's powerful productions were unlike anything ever seen before in India, but he was a tough task-master and a stickler for discipline.

Television had just started in Delhi, but it beamed only school telecasts, and those too only for three days a week for a few hours. Wishing to start general programmes, they advertised producers' posts and I joined as one of the very first six producers of Indian television programmes. We had an excellent teacher, flown in from BBC, to train us. We began functioning with the unrestricted zeal of pioneers. T.V. was black and white; we had just one tiny studio, and not too many norms. We pretty much did whatever our fancy dictated. I veered towards drama, quiz and variety shows, children's and women's programmes, documentary films, in fact everything except hard news.

I was with T.V. for eight years, and can look back on that period with immense pride and satisfaction. Woman's programmes were rich with all kinds of issues, from bride-burning to *mehndi* designs. I made numerous documentaries and short films— *The Little Tea Shop* won the Asian Broadcasting Union Award, but no trace of the film remains today. I

particularly rue the loss of the documentary I made on Pankaj Malik in Calcutta, after he won the Dadasaheb Phalke Award. We had his “*Aee Bahar*” on the sound track as he went to receive his plaque from the President. The film had many unique situations—Pankaj da singing “*Do Naina Matwale*” to his 70 plus wife on their terrace with impish fervour as we cranked the camera. Precious archival material, gone with the wind!

Television groomed me for my later incarnation as a film director. The tele-plays that I wrote and directed first saw the light of day on the tittle screen. Two of my most popular films were originally telecast as plays from Doord-arshan, and were warmly received by the audiences— *Raina Becti Jaya* later became *Sparsh*; while *Dhuan Dhuan* became *Chashme Baddoor*.

While I was employed at Doordarshan, Arun and I both continued to do theatre in a major way in our spare time, under the rather fanciful banner, Natyadwayi. Initially we staged plays only in Marathi, but soon switched to staging them in Hindi—mostly adaptations of popular Marathi plays. Tendulkar’s *Sakharam Binder*, Elkunchwar’s *Wasanakand*, Vrindavan Dandavate’s *Kulavrittant* and my own *Panje*. I also adapted and directed Noel Coward’s *Blithe Spirit*, Gogol’s *Inspector General* and Neil Simon’s *Odd Couple*. It was non-stop activity with a wonderful bunch of theatre cronies who shared our passion. My most gratifying contribution those days was to introduce the delightful rustic folk theatre form of Maharashtra to Delhiites—the tamasha. Talented troupes regaled village audiences with their music, song, dance, ready wit and bawdy humour. As the performers were mostly illiterate, there was never any pucca script and actors merrily ad libbed along, with biting social satire and scathing political commentary.

I even directed a Punjabi play in Delhi, *Chakka Chalda E* adapted from Madgulkar’s *Too Veda Kumbhar*. It was a strange experience, as I understood but did not speak Punjabi, which naturally limited my clout. During rehearsals, quite often a major fight would erupt among the actors over some subtle difference in pronunciation. Rehearsals would stop as Shyam Arora, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Sudha Chopra, Kimti Anand and Sudesh Syai, stalwarts all, debated which accent was “authentic”. Ludhiana, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar and Patiala fought it out with true battle fury, while the mute director watched helplessly from a corner!

After years of relentless theatre activity, always uphill, I finally got tired of the indiscipline of the Marathi stage, and after *Dhik Tain*—another tamasha written and directed by me, decided to bid it goodbye. My film career began in a serious manner with *Sparsh*. (I do not count the documentaries, featurettes and children’s films made earlier.) Although

technically there had been women directors before me, they had not been recognized in any significant way. Either they did not move beyond the regional pale, or their efforts were not serious enough. As *Sparsh* won three national and three Filmfare Awards, it was a lucky coup and I was in the spotlight as India's "First Woman Director". Till today I have not been able to shake off the "woman" tag. Nearly twenty years later, when we now have an army of competent women directing films with great confidence and aplomb, I am still asked what my major disadvantage as a "woman director" is. "Being asked this inane question in every interview," is my stock reply. *Chashme Baddoor*, my second film was the only one of my films not to win an award. It did become a milestone in Indian comedy, however, and made major box office history for a minor film. It was a youthful comedy, bubbly and fresh and (I like to think) had class.

My first three films were made for other banners. I decided—unwisely—to take the plunge as producer myself with my next two films, *Disha* and *Papeeha*. To my mind *Disha* is my most complete and gratifying film, and took the longest period to make—seventeen years! Om Puri played Pagal Parshuram brilliantly; Shabana (Azmi) was his wife, while the main protagonists were Raghuvir Yadav and Nana Patekar. We shot a dormitory in Lower Parel shared by 40-50 mill workers. Cramped, exploited, yet their spirit unbroken, these mill workers presented such portraits in courage. I remember one mill worker said laughingly that he had just enough space to sleep in at night, but not to turn over. I have used this line in the film and been praised for it. Plagiarizing from life! *Disha* won two wonderful awards at the Critic's Festival in Cannes in 1991, the Best Jury Award, and also the People's Choice Award. The film subsequently represented India in many international film festivals—London, Montreal, Sydney, Gothenburg, Mill Valley, Taiwan, Fukuoka, New York, Cairo, Cannes, Okayama, Guadeloupe, Houston, Chennai and Delhi. I cannot resist noting however, that in our own country *Disha* did not even qualify for the final jury screening for the National Awards!

Papeeha was a romantic fable on an environmental theme, the love story of a forest officer and a social anthropologist doing tribal research. *Saaz* was based on the story of two sisters, professional playback singers, in the Bombay film industry; it created a lot of controversy as its premise was too close to life. Shabana and Aruna Irani were the sisters; we had four music directors—and a great music score. Unfortunately Plus Channel for whom it was made, was near bankruptcy after a string of disasters, so *Saaz* was limited to showings on a T.V. channel.

One question I get asked inevitably is whether I belong to “art” or “commercial” cinema. My answer is, neither! I abhor labels in any case, and like to think that I have made a small little corner for myself in the larger scheme of things from where I function happily. A square peg in a round hole! I believe very strongly in entertainment and feel that film, being a very expensive medium, should be used with decorum and respect to the public, whose money is spent on it. This does not mean that you take leave of your senses or be crude and vulgar, resorting to blood-curdling violence in order to please the “masses”. I have great respect for the public and know that they welcome fresh fare with open arms—and an open mind.

I am now once more with the Children’s Film Society, India, this time as the Chairperson. Our mission is to make value-based-films for the children of India. It is a challenging, exciting and at times, daunting task. It is difficult to identify, let alone cater to the “national” child, and children’s films cannot be shown in regular theatres like adult films. Children not being independent individuals, their cine-going activity is controlled by schools and parents. We have started a scheme whereby children can see films once a week at a fixed venue. All we need is one theatre in every town or city which will run a regular show of our films just once a week. I am into my second term with the Society. As a filmmaker, I made one children’s film, *Bhago Bhoot*, with some delightful village children and the inimitable Malayali actor, Nedumudy Venu. So that just about wraps up my career graph. As for now, there are many ideas in the pipeline—a murder mystery film, *Khoon to Hona Hi Tha*, a tele-serial, *Hum Do Hamare Sau* and a stage play which I am still writing.

I guess I should put in a few asides about my personal life. I have always been intensely involved in some project-writing, directing or producing for theatre, T.V. or film. As a result, my private and professional lives have overlapped, and I realize as I look back that, sadly, I have not taken the time out either to be a good wife or an exemplary mother. Arun and I shared a great camaraderie, but somewhere along the way our marriage disintegrated and we decided to part amicably— to always remain firm friends. Even after our separation, we would do things together with the children, go out to see plays, to restaurants, concerts, whatever. This baffled people no end. Arun had a wonderful sense of humour. I am tempted to narrate one anecdote here. At a posh party once in Delhi, I dropped and broke my glass as soon as a drink was served. It was crystal! The hosts were very gracious and said the proper reassuring things. My second drink, I promptly spilt over my sari. Arun then rose to get my third (undeserved) refill. From the bar he asked me

in a loud stage voice, “Sai, how would you like to ‘spill’ your drink? With soda or water?” Arun passed away peacefully, though prematurely, in 1990.

Winnie (Ashwini) and Gautam are my two children. Winnie is a good actress, particularly for comedy. She did some outstanding roles in tele-serials and was the lead in my film *Papeeha*. She was never passionate about her career however, and has now found the perfect role for herself—real-life housewife and mother. She is very happily married to the brilliant lawyer, Abhay Abhayankar, and they have a darling little son, Abeer. Gautam has flung himself into the family profession of show biz. He is still a jack-of-many-trades—a cameraman, writer, director and actor—and my complaint is that he is not focused enough. I am somewhat of a loner myself, and selective about my cronies. “You must learn to enjoy your own company,” Mother always said, and I do just that. An absorbing book, a captivating programme on T.V., a cat in my lap and I am lost to the world. I love all animals—cats in particular. They are very superior creatures, and I cannot remember a single time when my house was without a cat—or cats. I am agnostic, and getting more and more disillusioned with religion each day. History has taught us nothing. We still hate and kill in the name of religion which always divides human beings into “us” and “them”. To teach an illiterate adult the intricacies of the alphabet or to read the newspaper to a blind person is, to my mind, the most effective puja one can do. The nation needs more hospitals, shelters, parks and playgrounds, rather than mosques, gurudwaras and temples. Are not schools supposed to be temples of learning?

This musing can go on and on. I have turned the camera on myself for a change and have opened the floodgates. The torrent gushes out full force, and threatens to sweep me away. Perhaps this is the right moment to resist, to “pack up” as we say in film language.

Indira Jaising (b. 1940) was the first woman to be designated a Senior Advocate by the High Court of Bombay in 1986. From the beginning of her legal career, she has focused on the protection of human rights, the rights of women and of the poor working class. She has argued several landmark cases relating to discrimination against women, including the Mary Roy case; the Rupan Deal Bajaj cases on sexual harassment; and Githa Hariharan and Vandana Shiva’s cases on the issue of guardianship in Hindu law. She has also represented the victims of the Bhopal tragedy in the

Supreme Court of India, in their claim for compensation against the American multinational, Union Carbide Corporation.

Indira Jaising has argued cases for homeless pavement dwellers in Mumbai, and has also participated in campaigns for the right to housing of the homeless. She has been associated with several Peoples' Commissions and is currently engaged in assisting the Peoples' Commission on Violence in Punjab to investigate the extra-judicial killings, disappearances and mass cremations that took place during the period 1979-1990.

*Indira Jaising is the founder-secretary. **The Lawyers Collective**, an organization of lawyers and law students involved in servicing the unfulfilled needs of victims of undeserved want. She is currently the director of the Lawyers Collective Women's Rights Initiative, which focuses on the elimination of violence against women, and is engaged in drafting a civil law on domestic violence.*

She was conferred the Rotary Manav Seva Award in 1998 in recognition of her services to the nation infighting corruption, and as a champion of weaker sections of society.



8

Democratic Lawyering

INDIRA JAISING

I have often been asked the question: how did you become what you are, how did you excel in a male-dominated profession, how did you come to work on socio-legal issues? I don't know, perhaps there are no real answers to these questions or perhaps all answers are rationalizations of one's past. Or perhaps some memory of displacement has always been with me, which propelled me into the fascinating world of activism in law. My family is from Sind, who migrated to India at or about the Partition of 1947. I still

have memories of my grandparents' home in Pakistan and think of it as the home of my childhood days. The horrors of the Partition have escaped me and my memories, but the longing for my ancestral home has not. I sometimes wonder whether this longing is just another form of escapism or a symptom of a real connection with my past. Years later, I visited Pakistan, a step which I alone in my family took—the older members of my family had no desire to do so—and remember the wonder that I felt when I heard people in government offices, the visa officer, the police house officer speak to each other and to me in Sindhi. For the first time I realized that the language into which I was born was actually spoken by a majority community in some part of the world. In India, from childhood, I was aware of the fact that in a country divided into linguistic states, the language I spoke at home had no state. It made me feel stateless. This feeling has been with me since my days at - school and I tend to think that in some ways it has given me a certain rootless freedom—of mobility and identity, an identity which I created for myself. I know that generations that came after me in my own family do not feel the same way, nor do they have the same memories. Perhaps I carry the legacy of midnight's children. For the rest, my childhood was uneventful, born as I was into a family of businessmen accustomed to travelling from the port of Karachi to the port of Bombay.

Like all girl children in Sindhi families, I was expected to marry early in life, procreate and settle down. I did neither. (I married much later in life after I felt I had acquired a certain level of independence and autonomy in my career.) No sooner did my parents try to marry me off, than the question of dowry arose. I distinctly remember my proposed parents-in-law negotiating dowry with my parents. I was horrified. We lived in a joint family and I had seen my cousins getting married with negotiated dowries and the consequent disputes in the respective families. The institution of dowry was well entrenched in the Sindhi community, nobody questioned it. My parents thought it was natural, and even said so to me as justification for negotiating. So widespread was the evil in Sind, that Sind had its own Anti-Dowry Act long before the Act of 1961. The community seemed to have carried its most backward traditions into India after the Partition, but I knew that this was not the life for me.

My refusal to be bartered away in marriage gave me a sense of self-worth. The life option of an early marriage and childbearing having been ruled out, a career was what I wanted, the ability to work and earn my own living. I pursued that option, and chose to be in law. Not having any lawyers in the family once again gave me the freedom and ability to invent myself. I do

believe that I owe a large part of my “success” to the fact that I had no one in the family who practised law and so I could choose my own role models. But I found none. Again, I had to invent my own, which I proceeded to do. Having lived in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as we have done, I have seen three generations of families of lawyers, from father to Son to grandson—but never mother to daughter (or father to daughter) to granddaughter. I have seen the transformation of law from being a profession to becoming a family business; what is more, I have seen members of the same family become judges, fathers to sons. It is almost as if I have seen the office of a judge become a hereditary office! I used to wonder how, in a democracy, such a phenomenon could exist. My good fortune (again related to the fact that I had no lawyers in my family) allowed me to escape that trap and look at the situation objectively and critically.

At the time when I entered the profession, it had a sense of stability about it. It was looking for no changes. Inherited legal practices from the British colonial regime seemed to be the only way to do law. The entire process of development in the legal profession was one which excelled in perfecting the tools and techniques and procedures left by the British. The prime purpose of the Advocates Act, for example, was to create one category of lawyers, doing away with all other types of indigenous practitioners. Unthinkingly, we accepted the oneness of the profession, without pausing to wonder whether it could serve the needs of the vast majority of the people of the country in that static form. Those were days when the courts, particularly the high courts and the Supreme Court, were unaware of their Constitutional function and saw the judiciary as nothing more than a forum for resolving disputes.

I struggled to find ways and means of making my work relevant, not only for myself but also for others. Fortunately, I was exposed to activist ways of achieving social goals through a fellowship at the Institute of Advanced Legal

Studies in London, where I met several people who were engaged with law in a mission which was larger than themselves. This was in the mid-Sixties, a time of intense activism around the world.

It took an event as traumatic as the Emergency which was declared in 1975 to polarise Indian society and make all of us take a stand on which political side we stood. I chose to oppose the Emergency and worked with many others who resisted the suspension of all civil and political rights. This represented a turning point in my life, and I think in the life of the judiciary as well. I saw it crumbling before the might of political power before my

very eyes. Justice Chandrachud's now famous quote that he had a "diamond bright, diamond hard" hope that the state would treat its detenus as it would its own children, had devastating consequences for the country. He and all the other judges who agreed with him betrayed the very people they were meant to protect.

It was during the Emergency that the idea grew in the minds of some of us who were opposing it, that we needed to put together an organization of lawyers which would serve activists in the trade unions who were being arrested and repressed. We created the Workers' Law Centre. Since the Railway Strike was the immediate provocation for the Emergency, we became involved in providing legal services to the dismissed and victimised railway and other workers. That Centre was the forerunner of the Lawyers' Collective which was founded in 1980 with similar aims and goals, except that it extended its reach to other sections of society including women, children and under-trials. In 1986 the Lawyers' commenced publication of the first monthly law magazine in the country. Its aim as mentioned in the first editorial was, "to break the culture of silence" that exists around the judiciary, to provide legal literature in readable language to those who need it most, and to address the legal problems of dispossessed sections of society. The magazine continues to be published on a monthly basis to this day, and its aims remain the same. The Lawyers' Collective itself has undergone several transformations and has been a role model for other organizations; it has a women's rights project, an HIV/AIDS project and a human rights cell, but like most of them it does face a crisis of leadership, a challenge which we are struggling to meet. Lawyers by training are individualistic, not particularly suited to the task of institution building. The Lawyers' Collective has not been immune to this shortcoming. It is a constant struggle to find solutions to the problem of sustainability. Today the organization is involved in providing legal aid and, advocacy within the constituencies that are concerned with the groups we service, and with law reform. An example of the latter is our campaign for the introduction of a law on domestic violence. As of now, the cabinet of the central government has taken a decision to introduce a civil law on domestic violence. This is not the place to document the campaign but it represents an attempt to intervene at the policy level rather than addressing individual cases alone. These activities have meant having to work out a new equation of engagement with the state without losing autonomy.

After the Emergency was politically revoked, the judiciary set out on a different path. It began to create democratic spaces within which the voices

of the excluded could be heard. It invented public interest litigation, within whose framework issues relating to the violations of the fundamental rights of citizens could be raised. While in the early days Justice P.N. Bhagwati attempted to articulate the theoretical basis of public interest litigation, that attempt has now been abandoned. It was Justice Bhagwati who said that public interest litigation was required because the British model of adversarial justice was unsuited to Indian conditions. He said that the adversarial system presupposed a high degree of knowledge and information about one's rights. It was based on "self-identification of injury and self-selection of remedy". In a country such as

India, this option was not open to the vast majority of people due to conditions of illiteracy and poverty. It was therefore necessary to permit civil society to intervene, in the public interest, on behalf of those whose rights were being violated. I have, however, seen the disappearance of this phase of the nation's history as well. It is pity that the rationale behind public interest litigation was never taken to its logical conclusion. That would have required a complete dismantling of the legacy of colonialism in law, which did not happen; as a result, today public interest litigation has been hijacked by the middle classes who can operate the levers of the court better than the working classes. Judges too did not understand and imbibe the jurisprudential basis of PIL, and hence have been too willing to open the doors of the court to the upper classes to use PIL as a tool to attain narrow partisan objectives.

In the early Eighties, the courts were willing to play an activist role in fact-finding, in order to test whether rights, including fundamental rights, were being violated. Groups such as bonded labour, child labour and untouchables had no means of voicing their own grievances, and hence others would be permitted to do so on their behalf. I was part of this historic process created by the court and was excited by these ideas. My activism in taking up the cause of the homeless pavement-dwellers of Mumbai belongs to this phase of my life. I promptly occupied the democratic space opened up by the courts as I was ready for it. Those were new beginnings for many of us who believed that we were in a profession that had a social function to perform, and was not just another business. While earlier, the court had been dealing with civil rights, it had little or no occasion to deal with social and economic rights. In the post-Emergency phase, the Supreme Court of India began to address these, too.

I began to work on my chosen subjects with great passion. Women and their problems in the field of family law had always been a matter of

concern to me in my practice. The Constitutional right to equality could now be taken seriously by the courts. The rights of undertrials, of bonded and child labour and of pavement-dwellers all took birth during this phase. This is neither the time nor the space to discuss the pros and cons of that phase; what I am suggesting is that the courts became accessible to people who were dispossessed and, in the process, many like me who felt that there was no place for us in the judicial system found ourselves included in the adventure of building a democratic and just legal culture.

Those were exhilarating times. We were engaged in the process of writing the history of the court. We were exposed to great judges. But there was also always a nagging fact present: the knowledge that the same judges, who were now writing brilliant judgements in defence of human rights, were the very ones who wrote the judgements during the Emergency. I could never therefore put my faith entirely in the judiciary. That was perhaps a good thing because it gave me a sense of perspective about my own role in it. It gave me autonomy and a real independence from the system of spoils and patronage which exists to this day in the legal profession. It enabled me to keep my distance from people in positions of power. As a result, I never chose to seek public office and maintained my role as the “outsider” very comfortably, with all its attendant advantages.

My women clients have influenced me immensely. Mary Roy refused to succumb to an unfair legal regime applicable to Syrian Christians in the state of Kerala, by virtue of which daughters were virtually disinherited in favour of their brothers. Equality for her, as for many other women, was a felt need. She had returned to her ancestral home after the breakdown of her marriage and was told that she had no rights to the property. Armed only with an unshakeable belief in equality she approached the Supreme Court for justice. It was then that I met her and together we worked for making the right to equality a reality for her. We succeeded in getting a judgement which made a more equal law applicable to her, under which she would inherit equally with her other siblings. Mary Roy taught me the power of the constitutionally guaranteed right to equality, but her battle did not end with the judgement. I do not think that Mary Roy has to this day benefited from it, but she knows that several other women, similarly situated, have. P. K. Saru was one of the first Muslim women to question the Muslim Women’s (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986 and I had the privilege of representing her. She too succeeded in getting a judgement that, as a divorced Muslim woman, she was entitled to “reasonable and fair provision and maintenance” and not just maintenance for the *iddat* period. What she

and Mary Roy had in common was the ability to say “No” to an unjust law. Years later, Githa Hariharan and Vandana Shiva, both in their different ways, rejected the idea that the father was the “natural guardian” of his children under Hindu Law and insisted on questioning it. Vandana Shiva maintained that the law made an unjust division between rights and responsibilities, giving rights to the man and responsibilities to the woman. These women, belonging to different faiths, all raised issues that were of national concern to women, and each in their different way, taught me that the women of this country have the tenacity and the passion to stand up for their rights.

It was the Bhopal gas leak disaster that brought me to Delhi to establish residence there, in order to attend its daily hearings. This city has come to represent the final goal of successful lawyers. The Supreme Court of India is perhaps the most powerful court in the world: it has the power to make and unmake not only laws but also the Constitution itself. It decides what the basic features of the Constitution are, who should be unseated from public office, what the rights of women are, how cities should be kept clean and pollution reduced, how dams should be built or forests preserved; as well as making education a fundamental right. Most successful lawyers have shifted to Delhi through obtaining public office such as attorney-general or solicitor-general or by becoming MPs. The connection between lawyers and politics has always been very close, but in my case neither of these known routes brought me to Delhi; rather it was Union Carbide. Since 1985 I had been travelling to Bhopal for the legal proceedings that were a fall-out of that disaster, and in 1989 the challenge to the Bhopal Gas Leak Disaster Act was being heard in the Supreme Court. This meant that I had to take a decision about my continued presence in the *city*; the course of my life has usually followed the course of my work.

I have often been asked, mostly by women lawyers: How have you survived in this male dominated profession? The answer, I think, lies in the kinds of issues I have been agitating for in the courts. Of necessity, the disinherited people I represent have no option but to approach a court of law to vindicate their rights. I sometimes hear arguments to the effect that the women’s or other democratic movements should not approach the courts but fight our battles in other forums. To them my reply is, the rich and the rights-enabled do not need the law, it is only the excluded who need it because they have no other weapon to fight their battles with. In that sense and that sense alone, does the rule of law have any meaning for me. Survival in a male-dominated profession requires that you do not become a cynic as

cynicism would result in dropping out. I have managed to avoid it through belief in the rule of law. Survival and success both depended on my remaining and believing in my outsider role, as an activist, and as a woman. In a curious sense I owe my success to being a woman in a male-dominated profession.

The court I work in today is not the same as the post-Emergency court. We live in an era of globalisation and liberalisation and I cannot help thinking that these issues have affected judicial behaviour. There was a time when one could hear arguments in court based on the directive principles of state policy, and on the building of a welfare state, the nationalisation of scarce resources, a redistribution of material resources, creating just and humane conditions of work and addressing the needs of those who are victims of “undeserved want”—a beautiful expression borrowed from the Constitution. Today, you would be laughed at in court if you referred to these principles. Today, there is an unwritten change in the directive principles of state policy; now “disinvestment” “liberalisation” and “globalisation” are the new mantras of the nation and the judiciary. Their implications are devastating. While arguing for the abolition of contract labour who work in conditions akin to slave labour, I have heard arguments to the effect that the compulsions of liberalisation and the need to attract foreign investment require that contract labour be employed. While dealing with a case relating to the duty of the municipal corporation to clean cities, I have heard it argued that the reason why scavengers are not doing their job is that they are protected by the Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Caste and Tribes Act, and that if we want our cities cleaned we must repeal this Act. The argument goes that if you call a scavenger by his caste name, you will be prosecuted under the Act; therefore repeal the Act to enable us to keep cities clean. It seems that liberalisation and casteism go hand-in-hand in court.

The challenges presented to the courts today are not confined to issues relating to child labour and bonded labour; even when they are, they can no longer be addressed in welfare terms—they will have to be addressed politically. They range from challenging Monsanto for releasing genetic material in the environment without a procedure for testing, to questioning the building of the Sardar Sarovar dam; they include issues relating to the signing of the TKfPS treaty; the introduction of patenting drugs and putting them out of the reach of ordinary people. Public health will become a matter of great concern. Issues also include challenging the surrender of national sovereignty of multinational agencies such as WTO and the World Bank.

My activism and the relationships I have built with some of the women I have represented has helped me to understand the complexities of these issues. Judges are generally not equipped to deal with them—often, they take the easy way out, dealing with them politically or on the basis of their own pronounced biases. It is a frustrating Supreme Court to be in, but that is what keeps me going. There is never a time when I can say my work is done.

As I approach the end of a fulfilling career, I reflect on my own “achievements” or lack of them. I have been a product of my times. My freedom came from the fact that I did not have any role models and was free to create my own. The odds were against me. I was a woman in a male-dominated world; I chose to represent those who had no legitimacy in society and that lack of legitimacy rubbed off onto me. We were the outcasts of the profession. But as I look back on my own life, I believe that my status as an outcaste made me fight for a place in the profession, and it has been successful fight. History was on my side. I found myself with a small band of lawyers who were relevant to our times, and together we built a tradition of democratic lawyering which we hope will endure. It will not be the same as in the '80s because that phase in the history of the nation is over. The lawyers of the current century, if they wish to survive in the tradition of democracy, will have to be political animals because the challenges are political.

There was a time, a few years ago, when I thought that my personal journey was done. I now realize that there is never a time when I will be able to say that. I yearn to do the things I love that I did not do over the years: go bird-watching, build friendships and meaningful relationships, and spend time with parents and family. I realize that law has been my first love, not just my profession, and the need to protest the degeneration in the system and the profession continues to engage me. I have to find a way to build my fun times into my life.

Have I been discriminated against? Yes, but that can never be an excuse for not achieving your agenda. I have succeeded despite the discrimination—I simply ignored it and carried on.

Anjolie Ela Menon (b. 1940) is one of India's most eminent painters. Well-known for experimentation and innovation, she has exhibited widely in India and all over the world, and her paintings are to be found in numerous private and museum collections, world-wide. She was awarded the Padma

Shri in 1999 and honoured with a major retrospective exhibition of her work at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, in 2002.



Pentimento

ANJOLIE ELA MENON

I must have been eleven when I found myself rudely transported from the safe and intimate confines of a loving family to the harsh realities of a military boarding school. In those first few months of acute homesickness and having to battle the bullying, the regimentation and the exacting routine of the Lawrence School, Lovedale my only refuge was the surprisingly tranquil art department, presided over by the poetic figure of Suhshil Mukherjee. Over the next five years I received a parallel education at the hands of this remarkable teacher. Before I was thirteen I was painting in oils and by the time I left school to join the J.J. School of Art in Mumbai, Mukherjee had convinced me that I was to be a painter, not a doctor as ordained by my family.

However there was a flip side to this early taste of empowerment. I was thoroughly bored at J.J. with the strong feeling that I'd done all this before, that I knew it all. But my family was not amenable to the idea of my becoming a "teenage drop-out" and I was compelled, instead, to take a degree in English literature. In defiance I held my first exhibition a month before my final B.A. exam with 55 paintings in a Delhi garden orchestrated by M.F. Husain, my friend and mentor, who then selected 20 of the best works to show in Mumbai at the Bhulabhai Institute. In retrospect I wonder that I survived the spate of adulation and the accolades that attended those first exhibitions. It was heady stuff for an eighteen year old, with critics like Richard Bartholomew acclaiming that "Never since Shergil had such a talent.." etc. I could so easily have ended up a burnt-out prodigy.

A year later, finding myself in Paris on a French scholarship, I was mercifully cut down to size. The hard routine at the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* under Professor Aujame of the *Fresco Atelier*, meant long hours on the scaffoldings and a winter of handling freezing buckets of lime-plaster under damp ceilings. Blistered hands and a red nose robbed me of any romantic notions nurtured by my previous experience as a budding artist. I was also thrust into a milieu where the great gaps in my education made me feel totally inadequate. The introduction to existentialist ideas, to the vocabulary of Camus, Breton and Proust and an exposure to the films of Pudovkin, Antonioni and Bergman were extremely important influences at the time. Many of my friends at the Beaux Arts were architects, and summers were often spent at the small chateau of one of these friends, Alain Peskine, where a whole bunch of us would “tour” the Loire valley on the back of a tractor. Evenings would end in furious debate — we were so intense in those years but there were many brilliant minds in our group. Eccentricity was cultivated by everyone except me—I just had to be myself to appear eccentric to the others. Bright saris, long hair and a big *bindi* sufficed! I had at this point temporarily spurned current artistic trends where both cubism and abstract expressionism were the main indicators of art practice among the younger generation. Already the focus had shifted from Montmartre to Montparnasse. A new kind of bohemianism was in fashion, spurred by the politics of the Sixties, the theatre of the absurd—Genet and Ionesco—and the intellectual ambience that grew around Jean Louis Barrault and Sartre, and the first glimmerings of feminist thought developing around the person of Simone de Beauvoir. Yet, I had no wish to conform to the milieu of the times and was constantly beset by the fear that my time in Europe was liable to be cut short by financial constraints. I was inexorably drawn to medieval Christian art, especially of the Romanesque period, and having spent hours in the churches and cathedrals of Paris and at the Musee Guimet, was determined to travel to other Romanesque sites.

At this time my friend from Miranda House, Shama Zaidi, suddenly appeared in Paris. Shama and I embarked on journeys to Chartres, Autun and Vezelay and eventually to Spain, where Barcelona was holding an exhibition of Romanesque art. Fortunately, it was still safe to hitchhike in those days and youth hostels cost only one franc a night. We wound our way through Spain and Italy, often lying on our backs on the cold stone floor of some remote village church, studying the frescoes on the ceiling! These travels had a profound effect on my work. At that age one struggle with the entire varied visual stimuli one is bombarded with and one has to start to

make the choices that will eventually determine one's own personal direction. The sombre hues of early Christian art, the gravity and starkness of the figuration, was further augmented by my joyful discovery of Hieronymous Bosch. Satire and a vivid individualism marked the oeuvre of the painter who undoubtedly was the first surrealist, centuries before his time. Eventually, on our way back home, Shama and I spent months in Turkey and in Greece adding to the lexicon of our visual experiences, the great Byzantine traditions where the iconic austerity of the imagery was embellished with gold ornamentation and formal symbolism.

During my second year in Paris I felt the need for a space in which I could actually paint, apart from my work at the Atelier Fresque. I shared a studio for some time with a Mexican painter named Francisco Toledo, who had been a disciple of Tamayo. We looked alike and shared a birthday, and were often mistaken for siblings! Toledo's dream-like water colours had transparency and were full of hidden light. The technique I have finally developed, though in oils on a hard surface, certainly draws inspiration from that translucent finish to which I added the patina culled from ancient frescoes. Though we had no common language in which to communicate, there was a commonality in our approach to painting and I think we influenced each other greatly, also sharing the restless arrogance of extreme youth, having been much feted in our respective countries at a young age.

Returning to India after my European sojourn was hard. I taught at my old school, Lovedale, for a couple of years during which time I married my childhood friend, Raja Menon who was now in the navy. Years of domesticity ensued, but more than that, a peripatetic existence where we were constantly on the move and not very rich. The babies followed, with a definite change in my subject matter from bearded prophets and saints to brooding nudes and mothers-with-children. But I was soon to balk at the unabashed romanticism of that phase. We found ourselves in England for a year and then in Vladivostok for a couple of years with two small children and no help whatsoever. It is only then that the realization dawned on me that I was *driven to paint*, whatever the circumstances. There was no escape, and no excuses I could find were strong enough to stem the tide of creativity and its urgent compulsions. I managed to get a booking at the Doma Khudozhnikov or House of Artists. There had never been a solo show here before, as personality cults were not encouraged and individual expression was subsumed by the imperative of socialist Soviet propaganda as practiced collectively by the artist community. The only "aesthetic" available in that otherwise bleak town were my Sunday visits to the local wooden church

whose walls were plastered from floor to ceiling with amazing icons, further reinforcing the early influences in my work. I completed about thirty-five paintings working in an improvised studio in the broom cupboard under a staircase with my ten-month old baby strapped to my back. Ultimately the nudes were not allowed but the exhibition was swamped by unprecedented crowds despite a ban on advertising. Visitors brought me gifts of deer antlers, poems, fur hats, bottles of vodka, even a pair of hand-knitted socks! For the only time in my life most of the paintings were purchased by students and working-class people. It was a different world, and an experience I cherish to this day.

On returning home, several exhibitions followed in Delhi and Kolkata in the early Seventies. There was not much commercial success though the reviews were good. In those days it was mostly foreigners or corporate houses like the Tatas and Burmah-Shell who bought paintings. It was a struggle, financially, but a very crucial period for the development of an individual idiom, a recognizable signature. It was clear however that I was being considered a maverick for a variety of reasons. My work was determinedly figurative when abstraction was in vogue. My paintings were considered “too European” at a time when Indian painters were engaged in a very conscious attempt *at* “Indianisation” in a post-Independence search for roots and an indigenous identity. Desmond Doig even wrote in the *Statesman*, “What is Anjolie Menon doing in the 13th century?” These were all contradictions which should have led to failure rather than success but I pressed on in my chosen path quite oblivious of the consequences. For some perverse reason, however, my unconventional directions seemed to attract a certain interest and I began to have a modest following.

In the mid-Seventies we were posted to Mumbai which was the hub of the art world and I was desperate to use those brief years to find myself some exposure in a serious venue. It was about this time that a certain tenet of the Bhagvad Gita was brought home to me by the discourses of Swami Ranganathananda: “An action done by one who gives no thought to the consequences that follow, such an action is Pure. Having abandoned the fruit of action one wins eternal peace.” This turned out to be a turning point in my life and career. I started to create a body of work without any attempt to even think of the results of that effort either in terms of showing it, selling it or even hoping for critical acclaim. I did a variety of boring jobs to be able to buy paint and canvas, from painting on T-shirts for six rupees a piece to designing shop windows. Yet I felt a great sense of excitement at the work

that was emerging. I seemed to be on a constant high and often toiled into the night after the children were asleep.

When Kekoo Gandhi rang my doorbell one day I was quite surprised, but fortunately had a large body of work to show which immediately resulted in the offer of a solo exhibition at Chemould Gallery — perhaps the most sought-after gallery in India. There was no looking back. The series of exhibitions that followed throughout the next decade saw a great interest in my work, at last a modicum of money, important commissions for public spaces and hotels and great media coverage, culminating in a centre-page spread in *India Today*. Whereas success seems to build on itself I was often beset by doubts about my own work and felt the need to measure it against different parameters in a more critical and competitive environment. So in 1980 I had exhibitions in America, but it is a measure of the naiveté of Indian artists that I had thought it sufficient to have these shows sponsored by the Government of India at the Consulate in New York and the Embassy in Washington! Two decades later Indian art has still not found professional venues or the support of mainstream galleries abroad. Despite sporadic attempts to promote it by a variety of agencies, the collective effort still tends to be amateurish in a global environment which is market-driven and highly secretive in its transactions to support the vested interests of different lobbies. Even now it is principally the Indian Diaspora that supports Indian art and I'm sure *Christies and Sotheby's* will bear witness to this. The great breakthrough has yet to come.

In the early Eighties yet another move found us in Germany for three years. There followed the bleakest period in my working life. Whereas the tribulations and austerities of an otherwise awful Soviet experience had led to a deluge of creativity, the luxuries of life in Germany complete with fancy villa, Mercedes and an Indian cook, zapped me between the eyes in a totally unexpected manner. The muse simply deserted me. It was after a year of anguish that I finally got onto a plane and came home. Under a bed at the home of my childhood friend Priti I'd always kept an emergency stash of canvas and paint which I attacked with a desperate zeal, finishing twenty paintings in a month, breaking the jinx. These were later shown in a gallery in Bonn.

If it is true that we are essentially creatures of our times, then the parameters of chronology and geography often determine the assessment of an artist. In the context of the Indian art milieu in which I function, one important factor in this assessment has been the approach to aesthetics. At a time when aesthetics virtually became a dirty word in the post-modern art

environment in the West, a whole generation of Indian artists persisted in the pursuit of Beauty and, by and large, of conventional easel painting. I was no exception. It was no coincidence therefore that this very preoccupation seemed to pander to a growing market through no particular fault of our own. This happened to me too, where the adulation of an art-going public suddenly started to overwhelm me. In the early Eighties this was somewhat gratifying but it began to pall and led to a period of disillusionment followed by much self-searching and introspection. Visions make themselves manifest in the half-dream state where mirage and reality coalesce to form a single image. The distillation of visual data, experience and the ability to sustain that vision throughout the process of creating a particular piece of art, is what really constitute the artists' struggle. Though I have done time in the garret, that was easy in comparison to this, the obstacle course, beset with pitfalls. This does not diminish but often gets harder even when both seasoned eye and practiced hand become more compliant. One learns soon that virtuosity is no substitute for the real thing.

In 1988 two things happened. The first professional art auction was held in Mumbai catapulting many of us into a hitherto unknown stratosphere of high prices and the visible commodification of our still relatively private practice of being artists; and the *Times of India* held a retrospective of my work at the Jehangir Gallery the same year. Already, the Christian influence of the earlier years had been leached out of my work giving way to more secular themes. By a happy accident the real window frame had replaced the window themes of the mid-Eighties and the influence of early sepia photographs from my husband's home in Kerala led to new themes and subjects more Indian in origin. I had at best established a visibly recognizable signature and created a substantial body of work which had been shown in about 30 solo shows including in New York, Washington and Bonn but wrote truthfully in the catalogue, "Thirty years' work merely brings one to the threshold."

In 1989 representing India at the prestigious Sao Paulo Biennale I was deeply angered at the way our country was totally marginalized, and saw at work the deadly politics of the international art world and also the kind of money (running into millions) supporting the efforts of those artists belonging to the rich nations. The jury convened even before the Indian exhibits were unpacked! The whole thing was rigged from start to finish and the Indian section exhibited in a corridor without any lights, inspite of my 24 hour *dharna* on the carpet of the director's office.

In many artists' work a natural metamorphosis often occurs from motif to symbol to cliché. I had realized that this was beginning to happen. Many of the motifs I had incorporated in my work, to mention just a few — the chair, the window, the crow, the lizards, kites, flying objects, children's toys, the ornamentation of a chequer-board pattern—began to assume the status of symbol or metaphor, but by simple repetition were becoming the clichés of my own making. The Nineties marked my attempt to escape from this trap and I embarked on a series of digressions from the established profile my work had now acquired. My friend, Sharan Apparao, the intrepid art dealer, facilitated my forays into the unknown both with encouragement and practical assistance. With her help I created a body of work entitled "Follies in Fantastikal Furniture" which consisted of resurrecting junk and creating "an art that is anti-esoteric, an art that you can sit upon". I also postulated that this was the very antithesis of installation art; one of retrieval rather than of waste, and therefore far more suited to our environment and social history. With this show also started my fascination with kitsch, as many of the objects were painted with gaudy visuals from film posters or calendar art.

Our son Aditya, a computer whizz kid, had been urging me to examine the creative possibilities of the computer as a tool. What made me capitulate was witnessing the scanning of images for the book Indira Dayal was compiling (*Anjolie Ela Menon: Paintings in Private Collections*). What followed was an exhibition called "Mutations" held in New York in 1996 where several images from my own works were morphed to create new pictures while achieving a new sense of scale. The title work, in which the same female protagonist appears in five different avatars, hangs in the National Gallery of Modern Art. This must have been one of the first attempts in

India to evolve an art form based on computers. Isana Murti wrote "With the brilliant use of a contemporary medium the present collection could establish a new Ism."

In 1997 the Buddhist iconography of Ladhak influenced my first-ever encounter with abstraction. The isolation of a single image and its meditative reiteration as in a mantra formed the leitmotif of this collection. Often the distillation of the Boddhisstva image into a simple triangle and the repetition of it to create rhythmic patterns led to a complex matrix of forms which determined their own dynamic. In 1998 a chance encounter with Gayatri Ruia led me to a totally new direction. Her offer to facilitate my working in Italy in a Murano glass-works led to a series of sculptures in crystal created over four years. The collection is entitled "The Sacred Prism" and was

shown at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai. This project has given me immense joy and satisfaction.

My earlier interest in kitsch finally found expression in the current series of paintings where I have tried to demolish the barriers between high and low art by engaging with the visual matrix of our own times. The ubiquitous religious images available in the local bazaar or the bizarre exaggerations in both content and style seen in film posters or political cut-outs, with the addition of traditional gold embellishment from Tanjore painting all form grist for the mill of contemporary art practice. Added to this is the fact that these sources are specifically indigenous to us, opening up new vistas. Gayatri Sinha wrote, "The Indian popular art canon is ripe for challenge and Menon assumes a stellar role in this emergent debate."

Our eldest son Aditya went off to America in 1983 and over the next eight years I visited him every summer. I'd paint all day on the verandah of his house in Westchester while he studied or worked, eventually accumulating a fairly large body of work which has now returned to India. They are part of the current retrospective (2002) which has been compiled by Vadehra Gallery and is on tour in several cities starting at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai. If there is any point in a retrospective it is surely that it marks a new beginning. After over four decades, a blank canvas beckons once again.

Sonal Mansingh (b. 1944) is an unparalleled representative of the ancient but ever new art dance traditions of India. She has been on stage since 1964. Her role as a social activist, thinker, researcher, orator, choreographer and teacher combines with her dancing, further enriching the tradition. She founded the Centre for Indian Classical Dances (CICD) in 1977 in Delhi, and in trained many young men and women, some of whom have earned critical acclaim already. She is the youngest recipient of the Padma Bhushan among artists in India.

A leading exponent of Odissi, the ancient and traditional dance style of Orissa, with a background of decades of training in Bharata Natyam, Chhau and Indian music, she has done original choreographies based on Indian mythology as well as contemporary issues. Lately her work has veered more and more towards issues concerning women and the environment. She is the winner of over a dozen awards, among them the prestigious Singar Mani Haridas Sangeet Sammelan (1967); Medal of Friendship, Vietnam (1983); Sahitya Kala Parishad Award, New Delhi (1985); Natya Kala Ratna,

(1985); *Vishwa Gurjari Award, Government of Gujarat (1989); Shiromani Award, New Delhi (1989); Bhai Veer Singh Award, New Delhi 1989); Rajiv Gandhi Excellence Award, New Delhi (1991); Padma Bhushan (1992); Indira Priyadarshini Award, New Delhi (1994); and the Medal of Friendship, Cuba State Council (1995).*



10

I Am My Best Critic

SONAL MANSINGH

Being a woman is so beautiful. If I hadn't been a woman, I wouldn't have felt life as intensely. My growth as a woman and as an artiste have gone hand in hand, because I've grown through my experiences and the wisdom I've culled from them... But I've not yet reached that stage where I am able to assess myself. I would like to think I'm very beautiful; I would like to think I'm very frank and honest, but what are other people's feelings about me? I have also been my best critic. I'm short-tempered like my grandfather, which is nice because I'm able to forgive and forget and get it out of my system in five minutes flat. I can't harbour grudges. I'm never evil in a broad sense. And I owe it all to a very enlightened upbringing. You can't hide what you are. The *sanskars* imbibed in your childhood give you a direction. I'm really grateful for the *sanskars* my family gave me.

I was born in a Gujarati family in Mumbai. My father hailed from Surat, my mother from Saurashtra. She was brought up by her uncle, Amrit Lal Sheth, who was a judge during the Raj, and who also owned the daily, *Janmabhoomi*. My mother was very beautiful—also fearless—taking part in

the Independence movement, wielding the lathi with Mridula Sarabhai. She was in jail with Kasturba Gandhi, in the same cell. Even today, she runs a gurukul among the Bhils of Gujarat. She's in her late eighties, absolutely fit. I bow my head to her. My grandfather, Mangal Das Pakwasa, was a very well-known name. At one time, studying under street lamps, he had topped the law exams (in those days, exam papers were corrected in England), but after he came in contact with Gandhiji and Sardar Patel he gave up his practice. That meant an income of Rs. 30,000 a month! He was one of the first five governors of free India; from 1947 to 1956, he was governor of the Central Provinces and Berar, which were later cast into Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra; and from 1959 to 1962, he was governor of Karnataka.

My grandfather had given away all his property in Surat, Khandala, and Mumbai to the country. (My parents lived in a rented apartment; they didn't even have a car.) He had the courage of his convictions. I remember his telling me that Lord Mountbatten was to visit Mumbai before leaving India, and a list for all the preparations to be made was sent to him. My grandfather wrote back saying he was a strict vegetarian and didn't serve alcohol, so would they please revise the menu. Lord Mountbatten showed the letter to Pandit Nehru who was very angry and asked my grandfather to send in his resignation. But when Panditji told Gandhiji about it, Gandhi said, "What's wrong? Pakwasa is right." And when Mountbatten was told that my grandfather was sending in his resignation, he said, "What nonsense, of course not! If I don't eat meat or drink for three days, I'm not going to die. But I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings."

My father's was a quieter presence. He was a typical soorti—what you call happy-go-lucky—simple in his habits and tastes, yet very humorous and quick-witted. These are the qualities a lot of people admire in me and they stem from his side. He was in the cotton business, buying shares and all that, but his real love was philately, and he even won some international awards for his collection.

My grandfather had a huge library, and I remember spending a lot of time during my vacations reading, going deep into mythology. I know the Mahabharata quite well. (Generally, it's the Ramayana that everyone knows.) All kinds of people came to our house—I met Jain munis, Acharya Tulsi, Bohra chiefs, Muslim kazis. Even Prince Aly Khan. They were so taken with my grandfather's charm that they came and visited him even when he was no longer governor.

Mine was a very Indian upbringing, yet very cosmopolitan and broad-based. Even *diaprisis* had to be called "Chunni Lalji"—"ji" was a must in the

Raj Bhavans! We are three—an elder sister, a younger brother and I. My sister and I were never made to feel that we were girls. The way one was educated—sports, dance, music, painting— one learnt everything. I’ve very happy memories because I was given total freedom. Right through I studied in a coeducational school and college. I was in the Fellowship School in Mumbai, a Gujarati-medium school. Quit India Movement protests had taken place on its lawns and I used to say, I’ve played in these hallowed grounds. We also underwent military training at the Nasik Bhosale Military School, and when I went home during the vacations, I would attend the shivir (camp) for women run by my mother, where I learnt riding, shooting, drill.

All the great names were our guests at Raj Bhavan. M.S. Subbulakshmi, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Bismillah Khan, Pandit Omkar Nath Thakur, Uday Shankar, Bal-ushar, Swadeshwari Bai. One fell asleep in their laps and woke up to the sound of, say, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan’s riyaz. At that time, Rukmini Devi was my ideal, Bala Saraswati was Art and Shanta Rao was Majesty. I would pop in to see exhibitions at the Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai and discuss them with Dr. Moti Chandra, the eminent scholar. I saw my first Kathakali performance in the company of Bharat Aiyer, the great exponent whose book on this dance form is a landmark. Damayanti Joshi, the Jhaveri sisters and Sitara Devi were family friends.

My interest in dance was very obvious to everyone.

Though both my sister Aarti and I were learning, it was I who got ready even before the teacher showed up—sort of bubbling to go-while with music it was always, *aaj nahin, kal, pet dukhta hai* and all those lame excuses. At that time we were in Bangalore and my gurus were Prof. U.S. Krishna Rao and his wife, Chandrabala Devi. They were wonderful people. I did my first fox-trot with my guru and also had my first gin-and-lime with him and his wife. They were so enlightened, such a darling couple. He taught chemistry at the university, while she came from a famous Kannada literary family.

When my teachers decided it was time for my arangetram they informed my parents, and I now had to go for classes twice a day. In our homes we informed our elders where we were going and what time we would be back. I went into my grandfather’s office, walked in there in my half-sari and said, “*Dadaji, main jaun chu.*” He just looked up and asked in Gujarati, “Where are you going?” I said, “For my dance class.” He said, “But you went in the morning.” Then he shouted, “You’re not going anywhere, get back to your room!” I said, “Why?” And he said, “I won’t have a dancer in my family.”

I was so hurt. But I'm like my grandfather—stubborn. So I went to the car, went to my class and sobbed my heart out. Of course the telephone started ringing, they were calling from Raj Bhavan. I sent the car back and it returned with a message—bring her back. I said, "I'm not going back." So my teachers called them up and said, "We'll drop her home after the class."

After that, my grandfather didn't speak to me for three days, and I refused to speak to him. I refused to eat. Finally, he gave in and said, "Come, let's have a truce. Tell me." "You tell me. First of all, you teach me dance, you encourage me and then what's all this? Why did you scold me in front of the others?" Then he explained to me about devdasis. I said, "I don't know about all that. On the one hand you extol Rukmini Devi, and on the other, you're saying all this." Very sweetly he explained, telling me that I should never use art as commerce or business. "You must understand and promise me so." I said, "Of course, I promise." What's the big deal? I would have promised anything in order to dance. Today I know, I understand what he meant.

After I graduated in German literature from Elphinstone College, the question arose: about what would I do now? Get married, go abroad on a scholarship, or appear for the IAS? What was it that made me say those famous four words—"I want to dance"? Everything came to a standstill. My father, mother, grandfather, they all painted (in black!) the consequences of wanting to pursue dance. I remember the scene. They said, you can do this and still dance. My grandfather said I had a lawyer's mind so I should study law, while my father said, no, she should take the competitive exam. On the other hand, I was being offered a fellowship to Germany. Naturally, they couldn't understand why I was chucking it all up. I said, no, I don't want to do anything but dance. My immediate family was very upset. In Mumbai, we were fairly well-known and I believe a lot of people said, what is this, it's not done. I went to Bangalore for six months, back to my gurus, and word spread.

By now I was travelling extensively, accepting engagements in Hyderabad, Bangalore, Gulbarga and in all kinds of remote places like Bilaspur. All-India recognition came later, in 1968, when I danced at Rashtrapati Bhavan during the National Film Festival. Then for the first time, the ICCR picked me to go to Afghanistan, with Indira Gandhi, in a delegation that included Begum Akhtar, Ram Narayan Sarangi and Damayanti Joshi. I was the youngest of the lot.

I've always been very sensitive to both men and women, to physical and emotional relationships. I have an ingrained adventurousness (inherited

from my grandfather), even in exploring human relationships. I was dancing quite happily, emotionally very content. And then, during my first performance in Delhi (1964) at Sapru House, I met this gentleman, Lalit Mansingh who had topped the IPS from Orissa. After the show, Dr. Charles Fabri brought him backstage—his father and Fabri were good friends—he was dark and very attractive. What struck me about him was that he was quiet, very reserved, with a shy, dazzling smile.

Here was one of those rare cases when a non-Doon school non-St. Stephen's recruit had made his mark. I had stayed on in the city to learn some *padams* from Swarna Saraswati because I had come to Delhi after quite a few years. He was posted to Geneva. I was on a performance circuit here, so he called me as soon as he arrived and I invited him to my performance. I told my parents. They said, "My God, who's this again?" You know how parents are about their daughters! Early next morning I took my brother to chaperone me and saw Lalit off at the hotel. For eight months, we wrote to each other and finally decided to get married. The marriage took place in Geneva in 1965, and I spent two and a half years in Europe, teaching and dancing in Spain, France, Germany, Holland and Luxembourg. I opened up the entire Indian dancing scene abroad—because, earlier, only Uday Shankarji had danced in the 1940s. For thirty years after that, there had been nothing.

In July 1968 we were back in Delhi. We were residing at the External Affairs Hostel from where I walked down to Triveni and walked back. In the meantime, Lalit's father, Dr. Mayadhar Mansingh, came to Delhi—a great poet, great educationist and great human being. I worship him—totally, absolutely. I owe my Odissi training to my father-in-law. He said, "You've learnt Bharat Natyam, you're a big star, now learn Odissi." And he took me personally to Guru Kelucharan and said, "Here's my bahu, you have to teach her." They were close friends. And he used to sit there during my classes, to bring me back home. I revere him.

I was getting busier as a dancer. Having come back to India, I realised that public memory was really short. Even two and a half years had made a difference and I had to re-establish myself. Another factor was that earlier, I had operated from Mumbai—that was my base. Having shifted to Delhi for the first time in my life, I only knew two people in town—Dr. Charles Fabri and Morarji Desai, What could Charles do? He was very sweet and supportive, and Morarjibhai was no help. I had to find musicians, *jamao* my own group. After this initial hardship, programmes started coming my way, but my marriage broke up. Breaking up a relationship—it really breaks

something inside you, and you take time to get over it. It's a deep wound. I walked out with nothing. I didn't demand anything—no alimony, nothing. I was 31- All my so-called friends turned their faces away.

But I thank myself for my pig-headedness. If I have to dance, I have to dance. I haven't taken emotional blackmail from anyone. Dance has been my greatest support—the absolute axis of my life. It did not allow me to feel shattered when I was made to feel small and belittled. You know where I went to stay—with my vocalist. He put a small *khatiya* (cot) for me in his children's room. My parents were coming, so I had to shift again to the India International Centre. I was getting frantic. I had hardly any friends, and no money. My colleagues had spread this rumour that she's not coming back. I had to telephone people again and tell them, look, I just went for a holiday, I'm back for good. I was so desperate; I was so disgusted at the way I was being treated by people. Those were the times I could have given up dancing, could have left the country for good. My parents didn't want me because I was going through the divorce. I just had nowhere to go. I went through hell.

Then I met someone who began giving me emotional support. I met Dr George Lechner while I was conducting a workshop at the Max Mueller Bhavan. He reminded me that he had met me in 1970. I didn't remember, because then it had been of no consequence.

And then I had an accident in Montreal which could have crippled me for life. It was a Sunday. August 24, 1974. We had gone to Nuremburg which was 50 kms away from Bayreuth. We spent a whole day there and were coming back at about one clock, because I had to attend a workshop in the morning. It was raining, very dark, with thick woods around, and few cars going that way because the road touches the East German border. Suddenly we saw an animal darting across the road. We were driving a Volkswagen and those days they didn't have safety belts. So the spontaneous reaction was to brake—though you should never brake at high speed on a wet road. The car turned turtle three or four times and I was thrown out, totally unconscious. But unlike in our country, the police and ambulance came within minutes. I had broken my vertebra, my left collar bone and four ribs. George had a miraculous escape. I owe my life to Dr. Fierre Gravel. I was in a plaster cast for exactly 11 months in Montreal and could have been crippled for life.

Emotionally, this accident did a lot of things to me at one go. I just grew deeper, more emotional, more sentimental. It was a new birth, coming out of that traumatic period. I was smiling at the world, it was all fun. I called up

Birju Maharaj—went to greet him and take his blessings. Sitara Devi called from Mumbai. And I thought, everything is so beautiful. Soon after my arrival in New Delhi my first performance was fixed at the Ashok Hotel. Tickets were selling like hotcakes. Everybody who was anybody came to see if it was true—whether I was really back on my feet, because rumours had been floated that I had put on a lot of weight and, “*Uski to haddi toot gayi hai...*” (She’s broken her bones). Anyway, that performance went off beautifully. I was back in form and it really felt as if my feet were not touching the stage. Soon after, I performed at the Rang Bhavan in Mumbai where Sitara Devi was also performing. No sooner had I finished than she came on stage, hugged me and wept. She took out her kala dhaga tied it on my wrist- I really feel that that kind of sentiment is sadly lacking today, and if it is ever shown, it’s misunderstood. After two months I went back to Montreal for another set of x-rays and Nature had worked a miracle: the vertebra had been completely broken, but two vertebrae had joined to form a new bridge. A new bone had grown. You see, the body is like a *kalpavriksha*, we have everything within us.

Earlier I thought children were a bore, but I love them now. Children are beautiful, but for myself, I’m very happy the way I am. I didn’t want to feel guilty having a child and not giving it my time. I don’t have a natural urge to have children, its nonsense that every woman should be a mother. Nobody has ever said that every man should be a father. I think I’m a much better mother creating healthy awareness among my students. I have nephews, nieces, friend’s kids. Children react to me so sweetly even when I meet them on planes or trains. Children, like animals, react to an aura. When they trust you instinctively, they smile and come to you.

So, I established this Centre for Indian Classical Dances in 1977, with a vision of providing facilities for training, research, performance and the propagation of Indian classical dances. All I had was the garage of my rented apartment in New Delhi. The Centre is still located in that tiny garage after 25 glorious, fulfilling (though a bit frustrating) years. Fulfilling under all circumstances because the beat and melody of disciplined yet creative energy has never ceased to reverberate in that tiny space; glorious because at times like the Kargil war, these students had the training and the guts to follow their guru to the front, to perform and cheer for the soldiers and fighter pilots facing the supreme sacrifice; frustrating because while the world was eager to offer thunderous applause year after year, it couldn’t put together a decent work space for a centre of such excellence.

In the 1980s, the Government of India granted the Centre approximately half an acre of prime institutional land in the elegant heart of New Delhi. The grant sent a thrill through the Centre's teachers, students and parents, who vowed to pool their collective energy to bring the centre into existence. Unfortunately, this dimension has been stamped out of our modern education. And that's what the Centre focuses on—for there are innumerable details of Indian culture that add a whole new dimension to our perception of Life. It is never enough to be well-read. The more you read on Indian mythology, myth-making, Puranas, the more you want to know. So, be well-versed with your stories and legends and happenings and events, to understand the import and symbolism of these legends. You begin to see that it's like an onion, keep peeling the layers and you never get to the core. But the whole process of peeling is the journey, a fantastic, mystical process.

There was a phase in my life when the desire was for more and more programmes and I didn't look beyond that. Having performed all over the Asian subcontinent, in Europe, in the deep interiors of India, a recital is no longer the be-all and end-all of my dancing. This has come from growing inward. If tomorrow people say, we don't want to see her anymore, I'm not going to turn upside down, and say, "My God. My life is finished!" It has been a very enriching experience, but Life is much greater.

Dance has been a constant flame in my life and I never lost sight of it. I am used to being centre-stage but that does not mean that I am narcissistic. It means that I am at the centre of my own life. You live life consciously, but with dignity.

Preety Sengupta (b. 1945) exemplifies the invincible traveller! She has been travelling across the world, always alone, for over three decades and has visited more than a hundred countries on all six continents of the world—and the seventh, Antarctica, as well! In 1992, to commemorate the 500th anniversary of that other intrepid explorer, Christopher Columbus, she became the first Indian—and the first vegetarian!—to reach the Magnetic North Pole in the High Arctic's. Her love for travel spurred her to take up the pen and she has published more than 25 books of essays and poems, in English and Gujarati, eight of which have won various literary awards for best writing. In 1993, Preety Sengupta was awarded the coveted Vishwa Gurjari from the Gujarat government.



11

Starting from Mile Zero

PREETY SENGUPTA

One *of* many beautiful images of a place visited comes floating out to me—that of the confluence of two rivers. On a hilly edge of the high road there is a small shrine representing Lord *Shiva*: a *lingam*, a *trishul*, and a tapered flag fluttering in the air. A steep flight of narrow steps descends to a slippery landing. The place is Rudraprayag in Garhwal district, the rivers are Mandakini and Alaknanda—one dark, deep, deceptively calm; the other foamy, fair, playful. The two distinctive waters stay separate for some distance, and then slowly merge to make a fuller flow.

For about two decades my life has concentrated on two things: words and the world. In other words, writing and travelling. Like the two rivers, these two activities are very distinct—one requiring solitude, concentration and being indoors; the other necessitating determination, patience and interactions with strangers all the time. Rather than think of these as impossible opposites, I prefer to accept them as the yin and yang which make a balanced whole. And truly, the two strands in my life do merge — when I write I am not oblivious to the outside, and when I travel I am able to explore the self.

From childhood, all my basic needs were always met and life was comfortable. Many of my interests—music, painting, dancing, acting, embroidery, batik, reading—were developed, and my aesthetic sense cultivated while I was growing up. For me the struggle was, and has been, emotional. Perhaps that need arose from having lost my father at a very young age. Being a girl deprived me of much freedom to choose, act or even think independently. The contradictions were clear from the beginning: a secure, affluent, life on one hand, and many restrictions on the other. I did write—essays and poetry—from a young age, and did travel every year, in

India, with school groups and family members. I remained a shy and introverted person, even suffering from an inferiority complex. At the same time, there were signs that I was going to be different, defiant of superficial traditions. I think my mother realized that, and worried about it.

Without a doubt, I started acquiring a personality and became an individual after going to America. I was a student, alone in a new land, had to face many challenges, and had to survive. It was in America that I started growing up and making my own decisions. I never got into a lasting, money-making career, but my way of looking at the world and its offerings expanded constantly. My first trip all alone was around the U.S.A., for three months, by bus. Perhaps it was from then on that I started giving places and people, what I needed most—understanding and love. And that was also the beginning of my absorption in travelling.

Owing to my acute homesickness for India it took me over ten years to feel at ease in America. In the meantime, though, I had begun to travel. I worked for six months to support myself, then left my job and travelled for the next six. It was unusual because I went alone. I did not know anyone who wanted to go with me, and I did not ask anyone either. People had come to America to make money and no one was travelling— not in the 1970s anyway.

When I went to Europe for the first time it meant I was stepping into a non-English-speaking region. I studied French, read about all the countries I planned to visit, poured over maps, but I was still all alone, naive, inexperienced and somewhat nervous. I crossed the English Channel by boat, reached Belgium at 3:00 a.m., and slept on a wooden bench in the small station for a few hours. When I woke up the station was swarming with people going to work, and children going to school. How odd I must have appeared to them. Later that day, in the medieval town of Bruges at the small tourist office, I happened to talk to an American student who told me that he was nervous to be travelling alone. It was as if his words revealed a secret to me. I realized that if men can feel afraid, then it was certainly okay for me—a young, petite woman—to feel a bit nervous!

As I kept travelling to more and more difficult destinations—Jordan, Syria, Myanmar, Cambodia, Tibet, Greenland, to name a few—I taught myself to be steady, to slow down, and to give myself five minutes before panicking! My confidence grew with each journey, and so did my determination to face the unknown. By now, for over twenty-five years, I have been travelling alone, without contacts or reservations or arrangements.

I arrive at a place and hope for the best! As I'm fond of saying, I pray to the local gods and let them take care of me!

The decade of the 1980s was the most active for me as a traveller, during which I visited all seven continents on this earth. I went to country after country feeling immense joy, paying no attention to hardships and inconveniences. For example, being a vegetarian was a challenge, and I learnt to do with less food, or no food at all sometimes and slowly forgot my particular likes and dislikes. After I had travelled from one end of U.S.A., Canada, Europe, Asia, South America, Africa, Australia and New Zealand to the other, I considered myself deserving of a destination that still seems extraordinary to me. This is Antarctica, the massive frozen continent around the South Pole. I sailed on a ship from the southern tip of Argentina and marvelled at icebergs as large as a city, the many glaciers, the untouched snowy vistas, and many other wonders. I started speaking of my life as before Antarctica and after Antarctica, so special was this voyage to me.

After this, my attention was drawn to the High Arctic. I thought of that vast region as being at least half a continent, and resolved to go there. I joined an expedition to the Magnetic North Pole in 1992, to coincide with the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of the western world. I wanted to do something special in my life in the name of some other adventurer. Also, I kept saying that it was going to be like embracing the whole earth, having gone to both Antarctica and the High Arctic. I may have sounded like a mad woman but to me it was real, an expression of my intense passion for travelling. I did reach the Magnetic North Pole, becoming the first Indian woman—as well as the first vegetarian!—to do so, and planted the Indian tricolour on its snowy domain. It was an extremely arduous journey and it took all my determination to endure the frigid cold—up to -70° . But the hundreds of miles of pure whiteness and the late night light, were simply fantastic. I was travelling by sledge on frozen ocean, and I have no doubt that some sort of Divine Presence watched over me for my safe return.

This was really the culmination of my efforts as a traveller for I could never accomplish a more difficult destination. But I did continue to travel, and I have been to a hundred countries now—some of them more than once, twice or even three times. I have not hurried. Quite the contrary, I have taken it rather slowly, always giving in to my love for the places I visit. My focus has been the places themselves. I am always asked if I do not get bored being by myself. The short answer is “no”.

But there is a lot to be said about my being alone and how it has worked to my advantage. What I have called my pilgrimage to Jerusalem inspired me to write an essay which launched me as a creative travel-writer. Gradually, over the years, I have received several awards for some of my books, and that has been very satisfying. Because I am by myself, there is nothing between me and the essence of a place, and it does open up to me in some special ways. I see it with wonder in my eyes, and at the same time feel at home in it. It is as if I am at once an outsider and an insider; a pilgrim as well as a promoter. I forget myself.

But nothing is as easy as it sounds. While in many ways all people and races are very similar, each place has very different components, and it is as if different particles of one's brains are required to be used in it! And then to be a woman! Ah, my problems are three-pronged: I am a woman, I am an Indian woman, and I am an Indian woman travelling alone. Add to this the status of being married. So even when they ponder about cheating or jeering at me, they also want to know why I am alone, or how I can leave my husband behind. They see me as an easy target and a bad, even loose, woman.

As a traveller I am not given the right to complain, because to any of my tales of woe—physical hardship or loneliness or that peculiar treatment from strangers— listeners are prone to say, “Then why do you go at all?” The positive side of it—courage, determination, passion— gets eclipsed. Then there is the matter of being an Indian. At national borders one is treated like a suspicious character. When the Gulf War broke out I suffered for a year and a half, having gone to Tunisia a few months earlier. Needless to say, European and American border officials had many doubts about me and repeatedly asked me questions like, “Why did you go? What did you do? Where did you stay? Who did you meet?” as if I was a spy. They were not prepared to believe that an Indian woman can simply be a traveller!

On a trip to Central America, Guatemala was bent on denying me entry, even though I had a visa and was living in America, saying it was because I was born in India. Suddenly, I had become responsible for all those Indians who use Guatemala's jungles to go to Mexico to try to cross into the U.S. And yet, for an Indian woman travelling alone in India is the most difficult. But then, if I am a fool to travel, I am a passionate fool and I simply cannot give up journeying around in India, or anywhere else!

I am constantly asked about my best experience and my worst experience! I find the answer difficult, because generally I tend to wipe out the bad instances from my memory. When I went to see the seven countries of

Central America, each day for nearly two months was really tough due to either heat, or long bus rides, or border crossings, and each night was sleepless due to too much fatigue or constant noise. It was a really strenuous jaunt. But when I returned and was asked about it, I kept saying how terrific it had been. I had really forgotten what I had been through. Till today, that trip, as well as the book I wrote about it, remain among my favourites.

But real danger is not to be trifled with. I have been lucky to survive several near-misses. One was at Uluru, a mammoth monolithic stone, nine kilometers in circumference, in the red desert centre of Australia. It is a thousand feet high and climbing it is a test of physical strength and agility. At its peak you couldn't see the ground. All one had was the light blue sky above, and a lashing wind all around. I felt suspended in the atmosphere. Trekking down turned out to be harder. At one point, my feet slipped and I started falling rapidly. I shouted for others to move aside and one Swedish woman, who did not understand English, stretched out her arm instead. That momentary support broke my fall and saved me from breaking a limb or a more serious injury. I thanked her, and she said (through someone else) that she wished to be born in an English-speaking country the next time around. For the time being, though, I was grateful she was not.

Talking about dangerous situations, I have to mention one other accident, in the deep, whale-infested, ice-cold waters of the endless Antarctic Ocean. On the twelfth day, the ship I was on hit some submerged rocks, cracked up instantly, and filled with water. The engine room got flooded, electricity broke down, the ship tilted and an unforeseen emergency arose. Passengers and sailors alike had to jump off the ship into the small square openings of some tent-like dinghy boats, leaving—losing—all possessions behind. How we were finally rescued is one of those long stories, but it is no wonder that I felt I had been reborn after that calamity. Along with my clothes, jewellery, money and papers, I lost two cameras and about two hundreds slides. That I still regret and this is why I still harbour a desire to go to Antarctica once again—to recapture it in my lens and in my eyes one more time.

If I have to impart a message to anyone I would say, emphatically, that no matter where one comes from or what one does, one must develop various interests and cultivate a long-lasting intensity about something in life. There should not be room for even a suspicion of boredom, because time is so precious and knowledge is inexhaustible. There are some qualities, like fearlessness, tenacity, contentment, confidence that may not be in a person's genes but can be developed. Most people say that they are afraid of being—or travelling—alone, but what are they afraid of? Themselves? which is

mostly the case without their realizing it; or is it something else? If it's unknown factors, how can anyone think of them as fearful? They could as easily be pleasant. So it's a question of allowing oneself some time, and others a chance.

Travelling may be difficult to sustain first, because it is expensive and second, because it requires physical movement. Leaving home, family, work and other responsibilities behind is not possible all the time but one can teach some sort of compromise by travelling off and on, off by going nearby and of course, by reading or listening to news about people and places. For each person the combination of "can" and "cannot" are varied, and each one has to search for one's own winning resolution.

In London once, at a community function, an acquaintance came up to me and said, "You are like a fish that swims against the current." It was a wonderful and rare compliment. It is the salmon that swims in the face of the flow, even at the risk of perishing. I cannot say I am prepared to perish yet, but I am definitely not afraid of challenging norms! Luckily for me, a pattern emerged as I was transformed into a pilgrim. I had no precedence or training or encouragement or guidance. My conservative background did not offer me any originality, but my spirit escaped, desiring to be free and fearless and alive, and to be in love. I could describe my struggle, and the long journey that it has been, in one sentence "I came from Mile Zero and reached the North Pole."

My life-force took me in a direction that is still not accepted by most societies in this world, but I am not asking for much by way of praise or acknowledgement any more. I recall a boat on the dark, deep, silken waters of the Nile. It travels alone, even against the current, with its sail swollen with the wind and its fate in the hands of a boatman. It does not want anything more than to be there for as long as possible. In the last few lines of a recent poem, I have used another image to convey a similar feeling:

At a transitory camp now

I pluck some weeds out

And let a garden emerge

A petal at a time.

I am aware that, personally, the path I took is not on any map, but slowly and surely it has been marked with the many milestones of unforgettable memories. Who knows, some time, someone may stumble upon one of those milestones and embark upon an odyssey of their own.

At least I can hope.

Aruna Roy (b. 1946) was an IAS officer until 1974. She resigned from the IAS to join the Social Work and Research Centre in Tilonia, Rajasthan, which had been set up by her husband, Sanjit 'Bunker' Roy. She worked at the SWRC until 1983, then moved to Devdungri in 1990 and set up the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, a group which is a working example of a transparent organization. She is a strong supporter of the movement for Right to Information, which succeeded in getting the Rajasthan Right to Information Bill passed. The MKSS built a grassroots movement that has triggered a broad debate and a nationwide demand for the public's right to scrutinize official records—a crucial check against arbitrary governance.

In 2000, Aruna Roy was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership and International Understanding, jointly with Arputham, the President of the National Slum dwellers' Federation. She asked that the award be given to the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, but was informed that it was only given to individuals. She then put the award money into a trust to support the process of democratic struggle.



12

A Life Shared

ARUNA ROY

It has become the fashion (or the norm) for individuals to say why and how they have become what they are. I think that for me the time has come to see how social conditions propelled so many of us to come together, to share ideas with equal intensity. It is more surprising, given the fact that we are all different in a million ways. What amazes me is that overriding the pressure to conform, there are still so many of us from different universes

who share a common concern. We are, after all, passengers together. We see with our many pairs of eyes, and indeed see very differently, but we all know that the joy of sharing far outweighs its negative consequences. This is therefore a celebration of the solidarity of years of communication and learning in which the 'I' is in fact only a record of the times.

Perhaps lives are only stories, in which we are often only the chroniclers. Living as I do in rural India, I am comforted by the fact that interest and involvement with people continues to be the norm of existence here. Sharing stories is exciting and full of learning; people find time to sit and talk. Friends from the madly spinning world of urban achievers call this a waste of time. I think that this is a grossly distorted view of the human condition—the time I have spent talking has led to the development of many strong friendships. It is only when there is the comfort of complete trust that the mind opens up to arguments and the acceptance of differences and other world-views. All those instant *development-wallahs* plan for instant change, like "*dhidir idlis*" and instant coffee, while actually we are like the errant monsoon crop of bajra, dependent on the rains, and as temperamental as they are; on the poverty of the earth we till: factors controllable and uncontrollable. We need to grow at our own pace.

Perhaps we in the eastern part of the globe understood it a bit better, but now that there is the market and new technologies that are supposed to solve all ills, we have instant everything. Including instant *nirvana*, packaged and sold to us at a price. An exclusive programme for the rich and a suitably mindless programme for the gullible, where *Ganesh* idols drink milk. For the poor it is a programme of revival of tradition, and many endemically hungry, anaemic women fast to make their dreams come true. A package which should have brought forth a vociferous, strong protest from students of Aristotelian logic and the science of induction—the logical counter to mumbo-jumboism. But there is a huge and ominous silence, broken faintly by the agonised cries of a few. Even the truly spiritual have failed to curb this overwhelming irrationality and jingoism that we now pass off as religion.

Childhood in post-independent India was both the optimism of a new India and the gloom of an assassination hanging over one's head. My Tamil parents and their universal humanitarian standards helped us shape our lives. Like many others we grew up with a blend of stones from western culture and history, and the rich heritage of a changing India. We grew up with many religions—Appa an atheist and Amma a believer, though unorthodox, decided to expose their children to either all or no religions.

At home any expression of concern meant one had to do something about it. It was no use saying we loved Amma and were so sorry she was so tired; if we really felt she was, then we had to help her. We were taught that struggle is a process of grappling with inadequacies in ourselves and in the world we live in, and learning to overcome them. This gave us emotional, intellectual and even, physical courage; a mix of scientific rationality and the practical wisdom of responsibility for one's own actions.

What we soon discovered was that millions of people fight these inadequacies in society and in themselves, people far less privileged than we were or are. It is truly the grains of sand that make the universe, and we are no more or less than one grain of sand. There is a deep sense of happiness (I do not like the word gratitude) that one has had the good sense to consciously realize this. It is a misconceived notion that social action is possible because of one individual. The unknown are indeed the ones who matter: they work without the compensation of fame, and even of recognition. They are the true agents of their own change.

There are so many wonderful faces that crowd one's memories. I recall in sharp detail the last time I met Dhanni Bhua, when she was sick and dying. She was blind and recognised me only when I spoke. A wealth of emotions rose in me. She was suddenly my great-grandmother — Neelamma patti, and my mother-Amma. I felt humbled by the power of the emotion between us. Here was an old Gujjar woman in Rajas than, unfettered but wise, and a much younger product of middle class metropolitan India bound together by bonds of affection and love. Strong as any filial ties.

Dhanni Bhua was many things to so many of us who had strayed into the village of Tilonia. She was old already in 1974, bent double with age, but fiercely independent. She lived alone, fetched her own water and cooked her own food. To anyone who did not know her she was an old crone, vividly recalling all the stories that circulate about wicked old women who live in dirty villages. But she was one of the most courageous and compassionate older women I have met. She fought with others to protect these "strange young women with modern ways" who had strayed into her universe. She understood us on our own terms, as much as we struggled to understand hers. She treated us as equals and taught us the dignity of poverty. She was respected and feared in the village, as all outspoken and courageous older women are in traditional society. What Dhanni Bhua gave us was space and comfort in an alien world. We had strayed into a society with arrogance and "knowledge", to try and save it from want and hunger. Through her love and understanding she showed us that we needed her more than she needed us!

Through her great generosity we learnt to recognise the severe limitations of our own self-righteous, narrow world-view. She was a mentor. Who developed whom? Who gave, and who received? Existential questions that will always remain ...

Dhanni Bhua was part of the time I lived in Tilonia, and many argued that she was one of a kind. But when Shankar, Nikhil and I went in 1987 to stay in Devdungri, 160 odd kilometers away, we met Kakiji and Bhuri Ya. We were then organizing people against feudal oppression and violence in their village, Sohargarh. Both of them were already elders in the village. Kakiji was strongly religious, bound by her own brand of worship. Bhuri Ya (“Ya” being grandmother in the local dialect), older and stronger, was more modern and a member of the panchayat. What these two extraordinary women gave us cannot be easily defined or categorized. To us they provided tremendous emotional comfort and security against physical violence that threatened us at every step.

Kakiji was visited in her dreams by “spirits” who told her to support us! She saw a woman in a white sari and two men who came to help the village in its difficulties. She was a person whom I would have not expected to support *us* at all, if I had used modern tools of analysis. She was conservative and god-fearing. For instance she did not approve of family planning; it was interfering with the ways of God. She could have been a Papist! But when it came to fighting Hari Singh, the local feudal landlord *and* oppressor, no one could have been more modern than Kakiji.

Many years later as Kakiji and I sat looking at the land we had fought to get, 25 hectares of now thick shrub forest, she talked to me about Bapuji. Kakiji was literate and therefore a phenomenon in the area. I thought she was talking of her father, but she was actually talking of Mahatma Gandhi. She told me she grew up in Sabarmati, where her father kept cows—the riddle of Kakiji was partly explained. She died of cancer years later, leaving a vacuum difficult to fill.

Bhuri Ya taught me what courage meant. She stood up and spoke out, straight and strong, whether on stage in Harsud, or in Bhim. She is a strong authoritative matriarch who brooks little interference in her domestic and agricultural control. We have grown older together. Her back is beginning to stoop but her will remains strong.

This sounds like a chronicle of women from one kind of universe, perhaps because I have learnt so much from them, and shared difficult times. As women we have shared emotional moments with candour and we recall them

as special moments of learning. But there are so many influences; we recall some and others influence us in invisible ways. Members of my family who were never lacking in criticism, teachers who opened up newer horizons and provoked me to question myself, the Brahmos I married into, the non-judgmental support of friends. Then there is, of course, a long list of mentors who reached me through their written words, spanning centuries and cultures, who made me realize how small our contribution really is.

In all this a special word for Kalakshetra, now in Tiruvanmayur, but before in Adyar. In this premier school of art and culture where I lived for two years, the performance of the dance troupe was more important than the individual contribution of any single dancer. Many were of the opinion that this did not allow genius to flower; it may well have curtailed individual excellence but even that is debatable. I realize now that those years too, taught me the strength of teamwork.

The universe is not fragmented. There is an undeniable logic that links every part to the whole, yet we continue to reduce ourselves to smaller and smaller units. Perhaps the categories we evolve to help us understand, eventually take us over. In the midst of so-called ordinary people this fragmentation is dissolving. The “poor” are merry, they dance, sing and love, they struggle, they quarrel. Despite the innumerable divisions in social living, they do not divide their minds into compartments that war against each other. There are no “other interests”, they are all part of what we call life. So I am still learning to accept that I can listen to Bach in Devdungri, talk of Chomsky with Lal Singh, and that the love of Bharatanatyam is a part of me.

Ours has been the generation of self-centred achievers. We, the already privileged, have been obsessed with “ourselves” and “our” development, and forgotten the social and political obligation we have to the less privileged amongst us. We are a generation which did not take part in the struggle for independence. Born in an independent country, we withdrew into our worlds to reach out to our own private Utopias. The middle class dream of betterment subsumed the social responsibility of a whole generation. We made statues of the great statesmen in our immediate past, and left the business of responsible governance to a colonial bureaucracy and an opportunist political leadership. We wanted to run the nation by proxy. And in endless conversations we talk of corruption and the nation’s decay, while we, “measure out our lives” with our petty gains. We conveniently forgot the heritage of Gandhi and failed to carry the spirit of caring and enquiry into public life. We learnt to look the other way and never stopped to ask why.

In the '60s in India, the “parasites and failures” did social work, which was also a euphemism for low-level political activity. The “intelligent” went into government and the private sector — I remember how Bunker’s interest in development was so little understood and how hard people like him had to work to prove even a minor point. To us in the university at that time Bunker appeared laudable, but an eccentric. I now understand his exasperation with all his friends a little better and later, when I also chose to work in villages, almost everyone saw this as climbing down the social ladder.

Even today the question I am most often asked is, “Why did you resign from the IAS?” The best answer is Shankar’s who says, “Why do you keep asking Aruna why she left one job? I have left 17 and no one asks me why! I have vended kerosene, made pakoras, worked in a *namkeen* factory, looked after chickens in a poultry farm, been a mate on famine relief works, worked as a wage labourer and many more...what makes this one job so special?”

For us, even 54 years after independence, power continues to be defined by the British and a colonial mindset. We go to Rajghat publicly, but privately still dream of Warren Hastings. It is an indication that we need to shed the shackles of the mind before we can create a more meaningful independence. Even now, as we struggle against one form of injustice, we must simultaneously strive to ensure that it is not replaced by a poor alternative.

Many shackles have begun to be cast off in the years that I have lived in rural India. There is now an almost universal understanding that the inequalities of caste are unacceptable. The challenge before all of us is to ensure that those who have suffered from caste oppression are not left with the feeling that it is a permanent feature, and that their only liberation will come from within the security of caste. The same is true of divisions based on religion, language and region. The challenge and the potential of the women’s movement is to provide an alternative that offers universal principles of equality and justice, emphasizing our unifying and non-violent aspirations. Once again, because of our unique position and responsibilities, we as women are perhaps best placed to find creative alternatives. This is what the use of imagination and hope can provide. More specifically, this is what struggling with working-class women has given me.

But not only the women. As powerful and compassionate as Dhanni Bhua, Kakiji and Bhurj Ya, have been Lal Singh, Mohanji, Narayan and Chunni Singh among many others, friends who have shared moments of doubt and confidence. Many ideas that have begun to have a wider impact, even the right to information and transparency campaign, were born in the

minds of so-called ordinary-people. Forms of theatre, the use of language, songs and, above all, the intangible qualities that make people listen and want to change; the creation and release of energy have been the contributions of those who will remain nameless in the annals of history.

I have learnt many lessons during these years. All things are connected—just as people and influences shape us, we can influence and change our worlds. We must face our fears and have the courage to work to realize our dreams, even at the cost of failure. Ordinary people want to work for change and are willing to openly welcome others into their fold. They realize the strength of the collective, not just in physical terms, but also as a psychological and intellectual resource.

Under such circumstances, cynicism and helplessness are an expression of irresponsibility. We can no longer work by proxy. We must not be afraid to question. Where we find something unacceptable, we must act to change; we must ask questions in the public domain; we must seek answers, and when we find ourselves helpless, we must find comrades who can criticise, inspire and support us. I have drawn my greatest inspiration from among such fellow-travellers.

Amal Allana (b. 1947) is one among a handful of women theatre directors in India. Educated in India and in the German Democratic Republic, she has been a theatre director since 1971. She has directed over 50 productions of Western and Indian classical and contemporary texts which have been performed in India and abroad. She teaches acting, direction and costume design, and has directed many TV serials for the national network. She is a recipient of the Sahitya Kala Parishad Award and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. Among her very well-known productions are Mahabhoj; Himmat Mai; Begum Barve; and most recently, Sonata.



Shifting Identities

AMAL ALLANA

Strange as it may seem, the acknowledgement of my being a woman has always eluded me in my work. In the process of making a play, one's subjective experience transmutes and transforms itself into an idiom of signs and sounds, into characters outside of oneself. The personal becomes an object—a production—a performance, executed by others—to which they have added a large quotient of themselves, so that finally, one can but faintly recognize one's own image and experience as distinct and separate from those of others. I have always maintained that a certain neutrality of attitude is required in being a director so as to allow space for the author, actors and designers to speak in their own voices; in that sense, I have always seen myself as a director devoid of gender distinction or bias. Under pain of being regarded as politically incorrect, I will add here that I have very consciously avoided the somewhat shrill call to rally around “women's issues” in any forum because, for a long time, these had about them the air of being exclusive clubs of angered bannerists, on the warpath against male chauvinism. Instead, I have always preferred my work to be assessed within the larger framework of the theatre movement, rather than the women's movement alone. Having said this, I am also acutely aware that my work increasingly reflects the consciousness of many women today, from different fields, who are trying to come to terms with themselves. Whereas the work of some women artists is defined by its defiance to the hegemonic dominance of the male point of view, others can be identified as voices which resonate with the feminine experience. Be that as it may, simply put, this essay is an attempt to encounter myself as a woman, through my work.

Central to this has been the exploration of identity in terms of character. This perhaps has autobiographical overtones as it is closely linked to my sense of self. It has been problematic for me to comprehend and align the multiple voices that stir within me, that rise and abate, often straining in ambivalent directions, into a singular, unified, integrated sense of wholeness. To play out as many roles as an average Indian woman does in daily encounters, each with its own appended and idealized role model is more often than not a bewildering and schizophrenic experience.

Despite the fact that ours was considered an extremely progressive family, as a child I, too, was surrounded by games and toys that would condition me

to want to play the role of a wife and mother—dolls, making their clothes, “house-house”. On the other hand, the world of theatre fashioned our lifestyle down to the minutest detail. While other families’ schedules were dictated by their fathers’ office hours, ours revolved around rehearsal timings; whereas other families spent their evenings together, our parents were at rehearsal! When others celebrated religious festivals or family get-togethers, we had no time for such “frivolities”—we celebrated after first-night performances! Whereas other young girls of my age were not encouraged to participate in plays and interact with young men, I could. But strange as it may sound, I was never encouraged to step onto the stage; rather I moved around the periphery, backstage, in what could be regarded as the “safe”, woman’s domain of theatre life. I painted posters, fetched and carried cups of tea for actors, and assisted my mother in the costume department. I was never led to believe that I had any talent in the histrionic area; in Met, that space had been earmarked for my brother who, it was felt exhibited a great sense of poise and self-confidence on stride from the age of four! He continuously did children’s roles, in my father’s plays, whenever required.

It therefore came as a shock to my parents (and even more so to me), when at the age of 16 I announced quite suddenly and without warning that I had decided to join the National School of Drama and become a director! I had never thought of doing theatre in any concrete sense, so I was surprised by my own insistence and refusal to follow my parents’ suggestion to simply join college and get on with my bachelor’s degree.

Looking back, this was perhaps my act of rebellion! I had asked to do theatre, which had been earmarked for my brother I had asked to do what my father *was* doing— become a director! Be that as it may, in later life I jostled between the two worlds I had become aware of—the female world of home and children, and the male world of theatre. Although not spelt out in terms of being sexually differentiated areas, they were for me (as I see today), the polarities within which I would continue to exist.

My journey through theatre then has been a journey of recognizing and reconciling these *shifting identities* which lay buried in my sub-conscious. For years I was unaware that these were the autobiographical concerns that prompted me to explore certain themes, characters and relationships. In fact, it is only now, as I write, that I have begun to reconstruct my actual biography as it has been glimpsed dimly through my work.

In my attempt to clarify the reasons for certain thematic choices I have made and the consequent narrative modes I have adopted and continue to

develop, I am somewhat disconcerted to find that personal details are nudging in for space, despite my best efforts to retain a certain critical distance in the discourse. It appears that when writing on gender, the autobiographical, however, fragile and vulnerable and needs to be addressed, as it perhaps constitutes the very experience of being a woman. For this reason alone I have retained some references to the personal, having discarded most along the way.

This concern with multiple identities has not always been overt in my work; rather it has assumed many guises in the shape of related themes that I have explored. It was as late as 1993, with my production of *Himmat Mai* (Brecht's *Mother Courage*) in which I cast Manohar Singh in the female lead that it came home to me strongly that my preoccupation was indeed with gender identity. The decision was made in a flash of what you might call intuition. At the time I was unaware of how this would affect my future work; it was a spontaneous thought, and I uttered it the very moment it seized me. The suggestion was equally spontaneously accepted by Manohar Singh and enthusiastically seconded by my husband, Nissar. It was a "moment" when everything fell into place. I had no reasons or justifiable arguments to defend my proposition; I simply felt I had found the key to open a door.

The process of arriving at a suitable visualization for Manohar Singh in the title role was long and complex, but throughout stimulating and exciting. In keeping with the idea that we were to create an androgynous character, our agenda was very clear from the start — Manohar was not to totally transform himself into a woman, rather he should "play" a woman, i.e., "demonstrate" one, not become one. In this sense, he should keep his own maleness in evidence.

We began to research older performance traditions in which men did women's roles and tried to analyze to what degree the feminine persona was absorbed and represented. For example, in the late 19th century *sangeet natak* form we found that Bal Gandharva, who did all the leading female roles, seemed to have affected a total transformation in voice, gait, and gesture, so with realistic make-up and costumes, the impersonation of the woman was complete. In a similar manner, but with a greater degree of stylization, was the rendering of the female by male *onnogata* actors in the *Kabuki* and *Noh* of Japan and the *Kathakali* of Kerala. Arriving at an understanding of all these was instructive, but perhaps what came closest to my idea of "demonstrating" a woman, was Birju Maharaj, regarded as the most subtle of Kathak performers. Without female costume or makeup, but

using the appropriate *abhinaya*, *mudras* and *chaal*, Birju Maharaj has mastered the art of representing women characters. His maleness is obvious as he does not look like a woman, and what we appreciate then is his “performance” as a woman. However, it was clear that all these older traditions had evolved a highly sophisticated grammar and vocabulary of expressing the female; in our case, we had to arrive at our own articulation of Manohar Singh, the modern actor, as woman.

The rehearsal period for me has always been a long affair, stretching over many months. It is the most exciting and productive time because it is then that we truly come to grips with the very nature of the text and seek to discover the means of performing it. For the director the process involves, among other things, understanding the subtext, arriving at a narrative mode, coming to grips with the spatial dynamics of the performance, evolving a directorial strategy which relates to a performative style, orchestrating the rhythm of the piece, considering the visual and sensual expression through colour, form, line and texture created by sets, lights, costume and make-up. Costume, which I define as an actor’s second skin, has a dynamic bearing on the actor’s use of his or her body controlling movement through space. Side by side it plays a significant and conceptual role in the theatrical expression of our work. All these aspects of articulating a text are inter-related and none can be seen as extraneous to the

actor because, finally, all devolve on and through the body of the performer who is the live medium, the finely-tuned instrument, who ultimately gives shape and substance to the entire theatrical experience, holding it together.

From *Himmat Mai* onwards I began to focus more acutely on deconstructing my characters along gender line, ripping them open for inspection, not only allowing their male and female aspects to emerge, but to remain exposed. The treatment of the central characters in *Begum Barve* (1996), *Nagamandal* (1998), and *Mudrarakshas* (2000), and the productions that followed differed considerably from the manner in which the character of *Himmat Mai* had been presented. Although I had located the male/ female aspects of *Himmat Mai*, I had more or less stitched up the gender inconsistencies seamlessly and presented a character in whom the shifting gender identities appeared and disappeared invisibly. However, in these later productions, there is a greater sense of discomfort. The gender split is not hidden, it comes through overtly and with a certain rawness. The transitions from a male to a female identity are important dramaturgical moments articulated through theatrical means. In *Nagamandal* for instance, they are

played out, presented, shown, and visible so that the very process from male to female, or vice versa, is actualized in performance.

Begum Barve focuses directly on the shifting gender identities of its protagonist. The brutal, bleak, grey world in which Barve resides is a world devoid of sensitivity, colour, human warmth; devoid of music, of women, of the sweet aroma of the *gajra*. It is from this deadly, subhuman, uninspired present that Barve, an old actor, wishes to flee into a world of light, colour, music—the world of theatre of a bygone era. It is here that Barve can imaginatively play out his deepest fantasy of being the “other”, of being the woman.

There was a sense of whimsical innocence in Manohar Singh’s portrayal of Barve, a certain transparency and guileless ness to this old actor’s yearning to play female roles and, through him live out his deepest fan hi sirs. In visually arriving to represent the male/female aspects of his divided self we clothed him in a wispy, skin-toned *kurta / dhoti* which, in a sense, became a statement of his nakedness and vulnerability, both actual as well as metaphoric. On this was planted a practically clown-like painted female face, The foundation was whitish pink bringing into sharp contrast the bright red lips, pink cheeks and heavily *kajalled* eyes. There was a certain pathetic grotesqueness in this made-up, artificial, female face which rested on an old male body. By visually highlighting the paradox of the head and body dichotomy, resonances of the divided self were implied—male/female, artifice/reality, old/young, past/present. The costume and make-up remained juxtaposed and unassembled, becoming emblems and signs, reminders of the deep sexual fissures that wrack Barve’s existence. There was no attempt at reconciling the schism. Similarly, a single ankle bell, again a sign of feminine vanity, was deliberately awkward and misplaced around the large, hairy male foot.

In *Nagamandal* the thematic focus shifted from the duality of gender imperatives within the same self, to a related theme—a recognition of the existence of the “other” in order to realize one’s full creative potential. Both the Husband and Rani must come to terms with the latent aspects of themselves as well as those of their partners. Towards this end Girish Karnad begins with splitting the male into two. In his divine manifestation he is Naga, the potent self, who lies dormant in slumber; in his human manifestation he is the Husband, the impotent self, who dominates the waking hours. Both aspects of the dichotomized self, though mirror images of one another, are unaware of each other’s existence. The action is drama-

tized by Girish Karnad in a story where each self/man visits the woman independently, either by day or at night.

Similarly, the woman Rani, has two forms. In her human form she is a new young bride anxiously awaiting sexual arousal and fulfilment, but it is only when she is finally with child that she assumes her cosmic or divine form in the shape of *Devi Ma* (Mother Goddess).

As a woman director, one problematic area for me has been the fact that most plays, whether western or Indian, have been written by men. Although many of them give us a profound and sympathetic insight into a woman's psyche and world, their works are often dominated by the male gaze. Suffice it to say here that for me Brecht's "*Verfreindung*" has helped me to gain a neutral perspective and vantage point into drama. Such a vantage point constantly shuttles between the polarities of the subjective and objective, between character and actor, between the emotional and the distanced, which in terms of gender could be read as the male and female. This is the minimal space I have chosen to explore, that twilight zone between sleep and waking, the thin dividing line that separates the conscious from the unconscious, and illusion from reality, where experiences from both overlap, and where moments of clarity as well as ill-definition co-exist. It is not surprising then that many of the plays I have selected to perform are structured as plays within plays— *Khamosh*, *Barve*, *Mudrarakshas*, *Nagamandal*. This allows the characters to have a dual existence, both as characters and performers who are suspended in a timeless zone rather than rooted in a stable, material world.

On the other hand, in plays which have the germinal theme of the divided self but are grounded in the concrete world of reality, my attempt has been to free the text from its solid moorings and allow it to swim and levitate in a fluid state. In *Aadhe Adhure* this was achieved through fracturing the text and handing part of it over to a chorus of narrators and musicians. In *King Lear* it was realized through spatially disorienting the audience, and in *Himmat Mai*, through casting a man in a woman's role.

In my search to evolve my own language of theatrical articulation, I have constantly been drawn to study and explore the older performance traditions of India and Asia, as well as the theoretical premises on which Bertolt Brecht envisaged a new theatre for a scientific age. These as well as cinema, are invaluable storehouses of possible narrative modes through which stories and characters can travel along several trajectories simultaneously.

I would like then, to describe my work as “experiential”. My attempt is to relate directly to the senses without the mediation of the mind, so that colours, sounds and images rather than words evoke meanings. What is important to me is to experience theatre rather than to understand it. This must undoubtedly relate to my experience of being a woman.

Latika Katt (b.1948) is a well-known sculptor working with a variety of materials, including mud. She has held so/o exhibitions in India and abroad and participated in international art exhibitions including the 1980 Paris Biennale; 1981 Festival of India, London; the ‘Stree’ show at Moscow, Leningrad and Tashkent; and the 1998 Five Indian Artists Show at Gothenburg and Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm. She is a National Award winner of the Lalit Kala Akademi; and her works are to be found in museums and private collections around the world.



14

Sculpting a Life

LATIKA KATT

My life is a cocktail of very English and very traditional Indian exposures, and the two have come together in a heady blend that has fuelled my struggle for expression, justice and fair recognition. How and when this happened, or is happening, is difficult to say, and where it is taking me is even more difficult. But one thing is certain, that if I had to relive my life I would take every decision in exactly the same way that I have done in this one. This gives me a good feeling and it makes me happy to share my life, especially with young female readers, in the hope that it will make them strong in a male-dominated world.

My father taught biology at the famous Doon School in Dehradun which was our home for many years— from my birth till he left in 1974. We lived in a very large Victorian bungalow with lots of rooms, big trees, vegetable and flower gardens that were my father's pride! Many types of birds were always chirping and squirrels and monkeys were frequent visitors. I liked being in my father's company more because he never fussed about anything and was a nature-lover. My mother was demanding and my brother mostly threw his superiority at me as he was five years older. He never approved of my short skirts. I couldn't understand why he set standards for me when I could do that for myself. My mother encouraged this and I hated it.

During mid-term breaks we went trekking into the mountains in small groups. I noticed during treks, that my father was very much a part of nature. I was eight then, and I loved collecting rare leaves and insects, and I also liked piercing butterflies through their bodies before pinning them up on my board. I took extra pleasure in making a complete mess of earthworms and big ants and occasionally ate the ants! And I liked dissecting tomatoes from our garden. I think I was most undisciplined for my age and my father never forced it on me.

This interest in dissection became a very serious preoccupation of mine when I joined college. I had a friend who studied microbiology and a whole new world opened up before me. The close-up, an enlarged view, was fantastic and each shot a spontaneous composition. The various cells, liquids and solids, all combined to make life flow. It was unbelievable. My mother certainly worried about me, because I disobeyed her in everything, especially helping in the kitchen. I believed that mothers produced children and it was their duty to feed them with good food. My mother was a very good cook. I had my own kitchen for my dolls; I even made pots for them with wet clay. I often skipped school to play in my garden, and my parents only discovered my absence from school when the principal came to enquire about my health! In school there was a rabbit corner and this was the best place for me. The sand and mud burrows were fascinating to watch, and much later in life metamorphosed into my studies of termite-hills and all kinds of nests and burrows. The boys of the school used to bully me because I was very tiny. Ducking me in the school pool and toppling me down the stairs was the favourite past-time of Dunu Roy, my principal's son. But I was a good bowler in cricket, and at Seven Tiles. Later in college, I was very good with air guns—at one time I even wanted to be in the police force, only for the guns!

Life changed suddenly in 1958 when I joined the Doon School. We were just five girls among 500 boys, and being very shy, I found it suffocating. I got caught plenty of times making caricatures of my father's colleagues—this was most embarrassing. My father insisted that I study with boys because he said half the world is made up of men and he wanted me to understand them. I did not really know then, but later, in politically tense situations at Banaras Hindu University, this experience helped me greatly as a student and teacher. It has been my greatest asset—I can read men at once, and can fight back.

At school, my best time was spent in art and music. Rathin Mitra and Mr. Deshpande made us feel very good, important and dignified. In art class we were not allowed to copy, and outdoor sketching was encouraged. In art competitions I regularly got the Sushma Sharma shield for outstanding performance, and it was this shield that my father donated to the art school in memory of my sister. My sister Sushma was good at every subject, was very likable, but died at the age of sixteen because of kidney failure. This brought about a great change in my life. My studies got further neglected and I stopped caring about anything. My father understood whatever I did. He never scolded me, but gave equal status to my brother who was otherwise my mother's favourite. This was very important for me. My father, being a teacher, helped me because he did not curb my impulsive nature and emotions. His tolerance of my very odd behaviour finally gave my impulses a direction. Being a good friend of Sudhir Khastagir and Rathin Mitra, both art teachers at Doon School, he understood the social pressures that were a burden on creativity, and often protected me stoutly against all that.

When I joined Banaras Hindu University as a student of sculpture, I found the BFA course was very beneficial for me. Later, I realized the advantages of studying in the holy city of Varanasi, and was happy not to have joined Shantiniketan at all. At Shantiniketan I found that girls were always behind the boys. This was not so in BHU where we were always the centre of everything, and would be leading the boys. It was the opposite of Doon School. Gradually, I realized the importance of the ordinary people of India and that my classmates here, though they wore pajamas and untidy kurtas, were no less than my sophisticated schoolmates. This traditional city gradually opened itself to me, and became my favourite city in the whole world. It is still one city where individuals are not judged by their attire—even very reputed personalities live very simply. The *sadhus*, the *Manikarmka Ghat*, the floodwater, animals and dead bodies in the river, Sarnath, the mustard fields, the smoke from small *angithis*, the colours of the bangles, silks,

woodcraft and the *chat-eating sessions* all became an integral part of me. This age-old, pulsating, rustic, organic natural activity of the ghats and the narrow lanes became very real for me. I remember that on my first visit abroad, in 1971, I hated London because it was so boring, without colour or sunshine.

I first encountered Balbir Katt inside my classroom after the winter break, and I got very annoyed as someone else other than me was trying to get attention. I asked him very rudely whether he was a new student. He politely told me he was the teacher. Balbir Singh Katt had joined the sculpture department of BHU as a young lecturer in 1966! The entire college followed him around and he became the most popular teacher because of his generosity, helpful attitude, and his agility. He walked a lot, worked at night and followed no rigid classroom time-table. Many of us roamed around together and did much boating and rowing on the Ganga. I married him on August 14, 1971, and he has been my best co-traveller, adventurous and easy-going.

I did my first wood-carving with him. His marble sculpting fascinated us—we hardly understood what he made, but his style of carving was very impressive. I was very fast in carving and despite bleeding fingers and aching arms, pretended that it was really easy and that I could cope much better than the college boys. Finally I got so much practice that it actually did become easy! I realized that sculpting was what I should be doing because it gave me such physical and mental satisfaction. A total sense of involvement was what I was looking for. I took up sculpture after much opposition from my HOD who felt that Indian girls were unsuited to it, but I was very sure that I would prove him wrong! The day my 20ft bronze sculpture of Pandit Nehru was inaugurated at Jawahar Bhawan (New Delhi) in 1997, I had the satisfaction of leaving all those inhibited men behind. Equality was what I was fighting for—always, equal opportunities for girls. I helped boys but didn't take their help under any circumstances. I would wake up at 5 a.m. and after a cold water bath all year round, cycle out for sketching or studying nature. I had to learn fast and perform well at any cost. At MS. University (Baroda), I would stay all night at the department and do my own firing of moulds. I also wanted to prove to everybody that my father's faith in me was justified. I was the first girl in my family to go to a hostel, and I became very famous as a student for my hard work. To prove equal to the boys we decided to stay out of the hostel till late. I worked till 8 p.m. or so, then went for late boating, after sunset, because we wanted to do black and grey studies of the ghats.

The ghats at Varanasi were strange. I felt very sad on them. Could it be because there were so many old souls hovering around? Here and at Nalanda I felt that I could relate to people of earlier centuries. There must be some reason why Varanasi and its river-bed have survived for so long. Five years in Varanasi changed my attitude to life completely. Witnessing so many dead bodies every day brought death close to us, almost like a friend. The non-permanence of the material world also became a definite “reality”. One thing became clear to me—that all of us come into this world on a mission and depart as soon as it is over.

Five years in this city taught me to be harder than the hardest and tougher than the toughest. As a girl student of sculpture I devised my own methods to overcome material handicaps related specially to weight and size. I had to win in the end. Whenever the problem had to do with justice, it was like being confronted by a tough wall of men. Men made all the rules and regulations for the girls, but we chose to defy them all. My aim was clear—whatever came in the way of my sculpting, I chucked out. I was fortunate that some teachers of fine arts were very liberal and experimental and I made the best of it. I believed in mastering all techniques, there and then, so that later we felt confident. No problem ever became a hindrance.

This has become a habit. I cannot tolerate injustice in India or outside. In America in 1991, and in Australia in 1999, I did not compromise, making it clear to our foreign hosts that Indian women are educated and aware of their rights and are a part of a democratic system. I have also become a great nationalist. I stand up and protest any derogatory statement about Indians or my country, and I absolutely refuse to accept “colour” as a mark of superiority. In India or outside, I find women are more daring and honest. Most men are compromising and ambitious, and tend to become insecure. It is men who need “real” education to liberate themselves from all their hang-ups. I was always against the dowry system and producing children in an over-populated country. I faced many problems because of my decision regarding dowry, but my life was my life. I decided that I would earn my own money. I cannot bear ill-treatment. I walked out of my in-laws’ house forever and never regretted it. I can never compromise on basic liberty and human dignity.

The best part of this time was that I achieved much more than I had ever dreamt of. I was also fortunate to have friends with different subjects and interests. I was always intensely intimate with my sculpture, but it had to evolve from its surroundings. The spontaneity in my work comes from my immediate reaction to people and landscapes and emotions around me.

After graduation and marriage I accompanied Balbir Singh Katt to London, where he was studying sculpture at the prestigious Royal College of Art. This period was a great period of learning for both of us. We travelled and saw many museums and historical sites in Europe and interacted with all kinds of artists. We returned to India in 1973, overland by bus upto Kabul and then flew across. This trip will always be remembered by me—being in Istanbul, Isfahan, Kandahar and around Kabul was a memorable experience. I was most impressed by the Afghans and their hospitality, so different from the “miserly” attitude of the Europeans. I still feel that the most handsome men are undoubtedly Afghan. After years of insipid food we had a taste of really good food in Afghanistan; the recent war in that region truly breaks my heart.

On my return from UK I went to do my Masters at the fine arts faculty, M.S. University, Baroda, under the guidance of Prof. Mahendra Pandya. I had seen his wood sculptures and found him original in his approach. I related very well to him and learned much from him. After my father’s death in 1974, when I suddenly felt very alone and was penniless but did not want to take money from anyone, he helped by saving my ego, which gave me the strength to encounter many inner and outer conflicts. During my early Baroda days I sometimes had to fight even hunger, but I survived without making compromises of any kind. This proved to be a period of great trial for me but I feel that I overcame all the insecurities of my life quite well. But one day, in desperation, when I was very tired, with low haemoglobin and body-aches, no money for medicine or food—I walked out into the middle of the road in the hope that some truck would run me over. It didn’t happen and when I reached the hostel I felt very guilty. When I thought of my mother and my little nieces, I cried bitterly and swore never to try to kill myself again.

I made many sculptures on life after death or of journeying to another world. “Steps of success leading to what?” (in the National Gallery of Modern Art collection) is one of them. I read *The Secret Life of Plants* and this too helped, and I spent many hours in Kamati Bagh opposite Fine Arts. Some of those tall trees became my very best friends, and even now when I visit Baroda, I walk through the same paths and spend some time with them.

On one such occasion, I was looking at a hut and discovered cowdung as a medium for my work. I made many reliefs with cowdung, wood and rope. This was a good discovery. I used indigenous preservatives like neem oils and tamarind and various fibres, and thoroughly enjoyed using it. That work is still in my collection and in perfect condition, even after 24 years. In 1978,

at an artists' camp in Kasauli, the invited critics were aware of my work in cowdung but later credited other much younger artists for discovering it as a medium for sculpture. This was unethical on their part and it hurt me, but I didn't want it to dampen my enthusiasm. Later, I did much work with papier mache, some of which was highly appreciated in Africa, Sweden and Japan, and are now part of the NGMA collection in Delhi. My first important marble carving camp was an Indo-Japanese one at Baroda in 1988 and in Yugoslavia in 1989. This is also when I was commissioned to make eight busts of Pt. Nehru for various countries by the government of India.

In 1970 Balbir Katt and I both joined BHU as teachers. We lived near the Ganga and rediscovered Varanasi. I did much photography, some large sculptures and, as a teacher, liberated many girl students. In 1985, my studio was gutted by jealous artists of BHU. I joined Jamia Milia Islamia for a change, and realized with anger that men can go to any extreme to harm women and get what they want. I fought men whenever they tried to harm me, and refused to be displaced by anyone.

My husband, Balbir Singh Katt (who was Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts) has been MISSING since 30.1.2000. I am sure he was hounded out of the campus or kidnapped or drugged—who knows? Till now I have managed to keep his house and his job intact, as his service is current till June 30, 2002. I can only hope for his return. During this period I made many new friends and many people came to offer me help on their own. Other favourite friends and students of his however, whom he had supported in every possible way, vanished into thin air during this crucial period. This was a sobering experience for me.

As I have pointed out earlier, some of us have a mission in life and perhaps my mission is to keep fighting such evil persons in order to obtain justice. During these last two years, I have come to know who my real friends are and who have just been parasites for years. I have never been jealous of other people's performance or achievements; I set my own standards for my work and have always liked to learn more and work better. In 1997 I fell down from a great height while working on the Nehru sculpture and was sure I would die. But while falling I felt no fear. I would die content. Balbir had never wanted to leave Varanasi and both of us decided to make a large art studio by the river. In 2001 I acquired a very beautiful piece of land on the Ganga with many fruit trees. I planted many more flowering trees and have now started constructing a large studio with chunar sandstone, the famous stone used for the Ashoka pillars. Two mud huts are ready to be painted inside by a fellow artist. I wish to hold

experimental camps here with disabled and other underprivileged human beings like lepers and the blind. I wish to give them a new status and financial advantage through art. If Balbir Singh returns some day he will have a wonderful studio to work in. If there is a god, then Balbir Singh has to be alright wherever he is.

Balbir's disappearance has brought me very close to astrology. I always did some palmistry but at this point of time I would like to study astrology more seriously. Occult has always held a mysterious interest for me. The power of the invisible and the vibrations of unseen forces have been a part of my sculpture-composition. The tension of cobweb threads, of fresh tendrils and the feeling of various sites, real and unreal, have all found a place in my work. I have used metal, marble, ceramic, clay, cowdung, papier mache, and wood. It is the ambiguous in art that holds my attention. The over-representative and obvious become boring, and overstatements become vulgar. Superficial and decorative art has no place either in my life or in the world of my sculpture.

At present I am HOD and Professor of Sculpture at Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi. I encounter the most unpleasant discrimination of all kinds and it is sad to see how closed we can be even about our own growth. How can artists be religious fanatics? Artists must be creative, and any creative person has to be above religion, caste and creed. My own struggle continues and I am sure it is god's gift because he also gives me the strength to win.

I hope that building a large, beautiful studio at Varanasi will create new openings and dimensions for me. I am waiting for some such change in my life, and of course, I can't imagine this world without me in it.

Kiran Bedi (b. 1949) was the first woman in India to join the Indian Police Service in 1972. She will always be remembered as the police officer who defied convention and used innovative techniques to retrieve a difficult situation—whether in prisons, on the streets, or in training institutions. Her most memorable contributions have been to prison reform, with the introduction of yoga and meditation for inmates; and in the area of drug abuse. Navjyoti, an organisation founded by her in 1987, provides cost-free residential, community-based therapeutic treatment for alcohol and drug-dependants. It has treated over 12,000 users and been recognised by the Delhi government for its work in educating and rehabilitating destitute children. The India Vision Foundation, set up by her in 1994 provides schooling for prisoners' children; gali schools for street children; rural

projects for village communities; and projects for the disabled in backward areas. Kiran Bedi has held important positions as a career policewoman, among them Inspector General of Prisons (Delhi); Joint Commissioner of Police, Delhi; DIG (Range), Mizoram; and Joint Commissioner of Police, (Training), Delhi. She was awarded the Asia-Region Award for her work on drug abuse prevention by the International Organisation of Good Templars; the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Government Service in 1994 (given to a police officer for the first time ever); the 2001 Morrison-Tom Gitchoff Award by the Western Society of Criminology, USA, for actions that have significantly improved the quality of justice in India; and the first-ever IIT-Delhi Alumni Association Award for outstanding contribution to national development, 1999-2000.



15

Taking up the Challenge

KIRAN BEDI

I had a very secure childhood, a lot of love and caring from my parents but despite that, I've had my struggles. Who hasn't? But I would say that I have put in extra hard work to make things happen my way. Excellence has always been my goal, and when you work for the best you have to put in that much more. I do not believe in achieving anything without deserving it, and so, I've worked and slogged to deserve anything that came my way. I had to make a place for myself as a tennis player, as a student, as a woman and, finally, as a police officer. Nothing came without its price, without sweat and toil. While I have worked hard I also saw my parents struggle. They were part of a joint family ruled by my landlord grandfather. He wanted to control my parents, especially with regard to how they would bring us four sisters up. But my parents rebelled—my father for the first time, due to which he was denied some benefits. But they didn't give up, they struggled for us.

I would want that every child, every girl, has the kind of parents I had. My father was a visionary, and my mother very determined, hard-working and caring. Both had a dream to see all their daughters grow up strong and stand on their own two feet. Every day at my home was inspirational, a training ground for the future. We all shared a common vision. Even as a girl I knew my goals.

I was constantly charting out the route to my goal-posts. My family was my world complete. I loved challenge and competition because I loved excelling. No doubt opposition came in the form of envy or petty jealousies but those too were taken in my stride. I was trained to understand them. In fact I was being groomed to be my own best friend and guide. That is why in my own service, whatever challenges came my way were no surprise. Early in life I learnt to face them and overcome them. The sports field is a great teacher.

What I've learnt from life is that preparation is the best prevention. Preparation is also the route to sustained growth and achievement. I learnt this early and that is why I was able to focus on the right methodology to achieve the right end. Life is how you perceive it, we can either make it simple or very complex. It is highly dependent on one's own state of mind and the maturity of one's response. And if one believes in self-teaching life comprises continuous growth.

My attitudes, right or wrong, are a product of my upbringing. My family environment was exceedingly positive—we learnt to focus on solutions not dwell on problems. I learnt to move on and not mark time. I was trained in problem-solving skills in a very natural way at home. My mother was my role model. My reading habits were exceedingly healthy, so were my leisure ones. There was regularity in sports, with right living habits and no hidden agenda. This was all a part of my student life, learnt at home. I've had my share of being hurt and upset, but my attitude of self-awareness and being alert has enabled me to focus on what I must do now, rather than on what has happened or who did what. Learn and move on. I would fight back, I would respond, but I wouldn't let myself be victimized. Throughout my life, I cannot remember an occasion when I allowed myself to be victimized. The moment I saw a situation developing, I acted. It was like being on guard, always. Without being strung out, I was always on my guard, and I am on guard by habit. Very aware of what's happening.

And family support was tremendous. My parents, my sisters were very rare, very, very determined, very loving, very unselfish, and very protective. But also very liberal, so it was protectiveness with liberalism, giving with

conservatism, giving me only what I needed. And I also never asked for more than I needed. It was such a remarkable relationship!

I remember crying as a little girl if my mother wasn't at home! I would cry if she didn't plait my hair the way I wanted, I would cry because I missed my parents! I was much attached to them, and my mother always knew exactly what I needed...when she should be there, emotionally, physically. The bonding was much greater with my mother, so she knew that my only need was that she must see me...even if I was home only for a few minutes, to change into my NCC uniform, she would be there for those 15 minutes. I never cry otherwise.. never. I cried only if my mother or father were around, never in the presence of others...Then I was a different person—I was a child only at home, outside I would take on the system. It was like being a soldier outside but a child at home. This is the way I was!

I think I have arrived where I am through every moment's focused travel—it was a journey very carefully charted out but it wasn't a lonely journey. My whole family was part of my journey. I may be twenty-nine years into my service but that's not all—these years include my father's life and my mother's life, plus the contribution of my sisters and the giving from my husband—the very fact that he doesn't come in my way at all and has never created any obstruction. He has been a great facilitator in my single-minded devotion to work. It's my mother-in-law too, who was so wonderfully supportive—she adored me—in fact the whole family used to get scolded because of me! She would say “If Kiran can do it, why can't you?”

The only jewellery I wear... are earrings given by my mother-in-law, they are her blessing and they will be with me till the last. But the important thing is that I was not psychologically dependent on their support. I respected it and I owed maximum return to it, but if I hadn't had it I would still have struggled on. It would certainly have made my struggle much, much tougher—it's been a very straightforward one actually, and therefore the results came much faster...

Perhaps everyone shared my concerns, maybe they felt that they were part of my sense of accomplishment, my joy...because all that joy finally came back home! Maybe they felt part of my commitment... my parents certainly were, so was my husband and my in-laws...I think all of them were part of the joy... It was as if it belonged to them, too, though I wouldn't ever say this is yours and this is mine.. .but the fact is that everything came back home with me because I didn't keep anything for myself...I didn't want anything back—it was all giving and sharing and doing, that's how it was. I think,

finally, there's a blurring of the line, whether you're taking or receiving or giving. You know, it gets blurred because the whole thing becomes one. Like for instance, in the Police Training College, god knows whether I'm giving or receiving. In one context I'm contributing so much joy, in another; I'm receiving so much...it gets really blurred! That's what happened at home: my parents got very excited every time they saw me doing better. My father used to travel with me to tennis tournaments and my mother would come to social events with me. Her last event with me was when Reeta, my sister, and I were in Chandigarh, and that was the first time she saw both her daughters on a common platform. We were both addressing a gathering, and she was as thrilled as I was because we saw my sister do so well as a clinical psychologist (she is one of India's best). She was specially invited to speak at Chandigarh and because I was then the IG of Chandigarh, I also spoke. My mother was so thrilled... we didn't know that was her last walk... My sister said we would never again go up on the same dais, both of us. For me joy was not joy unless it was shared at home. Whatever I earned, whatever I had, belonged first to my family. And if anybody needed more of it, they got it. That's the kind of total trust and faith we had in each other. As long as my mother was around I didn't even know how much money there was in my bank account. She used to give me my money, and she would save for me! It was that kind of relationship.

As far as my job went, the training I received from the government was very good, in the sense that it put me into that police groove. The interesting thing is that it wasn't the first time I was wearing a uniform. I had already been a cadet for four years—I was the best NCC cadet in my college—and an Asian tennis champion, so I joined training a long time after I'd joined the NCC, and I'd led NCC parades so wearing a uniform was nothing new...And I'd marched for four years, probably more than any boy had done. So when I went to the National Police Academy, it was something I did voluntarily, I was most at home with something I'd done for four years as a cadet. But police training was very special, there was training in law, horse-riding...After the whole training was over and Brij, my husband, came with his 8 mm camera to Mt. Abu to shoot, I rode for him and when I did the last race, it was very dramatic: as my horse cleared the obstacle I fell, and Brij's camera reel also finished at that very moment—it actually stopped with me in the air! During my time, horse-riding was the most hilarious part of our training...horses would run away with the probationers and they would be cringing to them! Even now, we all remember whose horse ran away! We're

all old and gray, but we still remember! The only difference is that I was the only girl...

Did I feel lonely? No way! I was having great fun...I was already married so I was emotionally secure, and I had great fun! Classmates were good friends. I wanted challenges all the time...I could've saved a lot of wasted energy in my profession...I may, however, have converted that diverted or wasted energy into a whole learning exercise, as one of going through fire, but the fire need not have been there at all in the first place. So there have been many avoidable situations in my career. In a way they helped me test myself, my endurance, my physical stamina, my ability to do my best for the day. Some of my seniors could have played a better role...many of those situations would have been avoidable. Even the Mizoram situation was avoidable, but they helped in my spiritual growth... things that happened during my prison posting, or things like not getting a posting for nine months—I think they were all learning exercises, and because my attitude was to find the positive in everything, I think I made the best of all adversities.

Hard work doesn't agonize me; but the absence of my mother is agonizing. I think it's my greatest personal loss. With my father we went through a major medical mishap in Mizoram—in fact, every time I took a posting outside Delhi, it had something to do with illness in the immediate family. When in Mizoram, it was my father, when in Chandigarh, it was my mother and when I went to Goa, it was my daughter. They were terribly jinxed...and these were very, very agonizing moments... But professionally I've always felt totally in command, I think my strength is my ability to communicate, my personal involvement, problem-solving, participatory work, systematic working, transparency, personal accountability, constant internal audit, social audit of performance, constant review, constant learning from people I work with, constant checking out whether it's working, constant improvement, innovation...being creative, taking on challenges, seeing what's next, how far, how intensive... I think these are my strengths. And one of my greatest weaknesses is, total trust—that's when I get hurt most, when there's a breach of trust. Fortunately it doesn't happen too often.

But I do lose my temper. And I can shout—I do shout! But it's very targeted, for effect only, not because I've lost control. It has a reason, it has an effect, and it works! Sometimes you have to show your anger—thus far and no further. It even works for the other person's benefit.

My wish for the next generation is that they be value-based, strongly value-based. With character. Happy people within, and giving by nature. This is how I would like a nation to be, made up of people with character, creative and giving. I think once we get there, everything else will fall into place. Balanced living, taking only as much as one needs—that's the kind of younger generation I would love to see. Well-read, creative people who are spiritually inclined and sensitive. But apparently our system of education doesn't provide for this, it's spiritually barren. It does not offer mental stimulation nor insist on creativity. It merely qualifies you for a job, which may provide you with a certain amount of money. In other words it's about making money somehow, not about creativity. Our education system does not teach us that all work has a purpose, making money is only one part of it. And the purpose is to cater to the needs of the society to which we collectively belong.

Dreams? If by dreams we mean illusions then I have none. I work hard and sleep dreamlessly. But I do live every moment of my day fully. And I owe this attitude to the blessings and dedication of my parents. If I want to be remembered in any way it is as one who was worthy of the upbringing of my mother and father.

As told to Lavlin Thadani

Kith Manorama (b. 1952) is a social worker and human rights activist who is deeply involved in issues concerning women from poorer sections of society, the unorganised sector of labour, and Dalits. She is known for her immense mobilising capacity, and the zeal and passion with which she takes up various issues of social justice. Ruth Manorama is currently President of the National Alliance of Women, General Secretary of Women's Voice, and the National Convenor of the National Federation of Dalit Women.



RUTH MANORAMA

I grew up in the late 1950s and '60s, when winds of change were sweeping the world. India was just beginning to learn the implication of its tryst with destiny and embarking on new developmental paths, hitherto unexplored. The young were toying with new political ideologies, the atmosphere bright with hope, tinged with fear. The Seventies saw a growth in the women's movement especially among urban women, but struggle was nothing new for them. In rural areas, in several parts of India, women were already familiar with struggle — the pre-independence Telengana movement, Tebhaga, the tribal uprisings in Central India, the anti-price-rise struggles in Maharashtra, anti-dowry movements in urban centres, and, not least, the protests following the judgement in the Mathura rape case showed that women in India were not long-suffering *Bharatiya naris*. The declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year and International Women's Decade only served to give greater impetus to an understanding of the condition of women in India, and drew more and more academics, political thinkers and activists into thinking and working on women's issues. At the same time Dalit consciousness was also-growing. At another level, social action became the agenda of many groups involved in the social sector, including the mainstream church. I could not but be influenced by all these streams of thought and action.

Chetpet, then a semi-urban suburb in Madras, a large extended family, living in and around the vicinity. My mother was so keenly interested in women's education that she resisted her father's conservatism to attend school, and ultimately became a teacher. She also became a Christian in her teens and so admired Pandita Ramabai that she named me, her eldest, after the Pandita's daughter — that's why Manorama is my second name. My father mobilized the poor residents of the villages around their locality to struggle, successfully, for titles to land they had been settled on for generations. My father, who was employed with the Posts & Telegraph and my mother, who is a teacher in a middle school, encouraged all their daughters to study, have careers, be self-reliant and become role models for the Dalit community from which we came. They kept an open house to which anyone in need could come. Needless to say, their deep and practical faith in God, their hard work, principles of justice, dignity and service to the poor were my greatest motivation.

We were able to get admitted to local schools and colleges. After taking a degree in science from the Women's Christian College, Madras, I was sent

to train in community organization, using Saul D'Alinsky's methodology. While in the field doing fieldwork my father, who was eager for me to do a good post-graduate or professional course, found out about the M.A. in social work at Stella Maris College, Madras, and applied on my behalf. I was not too keen, as I felt I was already working. When the interview call came I was still in a village in south Tamil Nadu. My mother went to the college and met the head of the department, a Filipino nun, and requested her to give me a fresh date. She explained what I was doing, upon which the good sister informed her that there was no need for me to attend the interview—I had already been selected for the course! I was summoned by my father and given the fees—some Rs. 650 for the year and asked to report to the college. I dilly-dallied for a few days, with the money - tied up in my handkerchief. One day, a reminder from Stella Maris College regarding the payment of fees arrived in the post. Seeing it, I quickly hid it from my father, rushed to pay the fees and joined the course.

After my Master's, I joined an NGO in Madras for a year. At the time elections were taking place so it was a good opportunity to impart some political education to the people. Just around then flash floods completely submerged the huge slum called *Dhideer Nagar* in Saidapet, where I was working. My first work involved education and housing for the inhabitants. We were successful in getting the whole slum rebuilt, raising the ground level and improving the facilities to avoid the annual floods that inundated the place. I next joined GRAIL, an international women's organisation. I was based in Bangalore with field projects in South India, involved in designing education and community development training inputs for the community and field-workers. I applied the Conscientisation Methodology of Paulo Freire (in which I had trained as well) in these situations.

After five years of work I decided that it was necessary to do some work on my own. I was of the firm opinion that marginalised people can be organized to work for their rights. Accordingly, Women's Voice was set up, born of the needs of women in the slums of Bangalore. We started in 1985 and worked on health, housing and other needs of the urban poor. Seeing the plight of working-class women in the urban areas, mostly engaged in domestic work, the Bangalore Gruhakarmikara Sangha (Domestic Workers' Union) was registered as a trade union under the Trade Union Act for the first time in the country. While on the subject of trade unions, I am also closely associated with the National Centre for Labour (NCL), the first apex body in the country to protect the interests of the unorganized sector. The

Domestic Workers Union is part of NCL, of which I am one of the secretaries.

In late 1988, I was part of a meeting of NGO leaders from across the country who came together to clarify concepts related to women's development, reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of NGO functions, and strategise for strengthening women's development interventions. It emerged that support was required at the level of perspective, programmes and internal structure and functioning. In 1989, Initiatives: Women in Development (IWID) was started by a group of us, including Jyotsna Chatterjee, Hari John, Anthya Madiath, Shobha Shakarwade, Martha Pushparani and myself. IWID has since gone on to become one of the premier gender and development training institutions for women in NGOs, and has worked in many areas of advocacy, lobbying and capacity-building for women at all levels. It has participated in many policy initiatives and I continue to be actively associated with it. In 1986, I was asked to participate in a cross-cultural study between Afro-Americans in the U.S and Dalits in India. Of course, my interest was also in studying the life of black women in the U.S and to compare it with the situation of "Untouchables" — Dalit women in India. This enabled me to see how, while many of the issues were common, at the very core the issues of marginalised sections of society were very different. This was also a time when Christian Dalit liberation was beginning its work, and subaltern studies were gaining momentum. In India, the status of women within Dalit communities in particular was even more precarious. They suffered multiple oppressions—as women, as Dalits, and again as the poor and totally marginalised. This is why I call them the Dalits among Dalits. I also realised now that large, mass-based organizations were necessary to take up issues related to social structures, affecting large populations over a wide area. I was associated with the Asian Women's Human Rights Council as a member of the core group and in 1993; I organized the Public Hearing on Violence against Dalit Women in Bangalore. The National Federation of Dalit Women was born of that effort.

In 1994, NGOs in India decided that Indian women needed to be mobilised in large numbers to participate meaningfully in the Fourth UN World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in 1995. With the support of a few sympathetic bilateral and multi-lateral donors, a group was set up to facilitate this process. A Coordination Unit was set up in Delhi, comprising professionals and women activists working on women from a grassroots perspective. I was part of this advisory group, which had representatives from all parts of India. Its main role was to disseminate

information on the Conference, to foster the participation of women at the grassroots, to reflect their problems and aspirations, and to gather their experiences. These could then feed into the deliberations not only for the main Conference but also for the NGO Forum at Huairou, which was to run almost concurrently with the official one.

A few of us felt the need to have a similar Coordination Unit in South India to carry out the same functions there. We felt it would be easier to reach out to groups and institutions and be more effective due to greater proximity to the region and our familiarity with local languages. The Coordination Unit (Bangalore) was set up as a result and began functioning at the Indian Social Institute, Bangalore.

In India, rightly or wrongly, the women's movement has a predominantly urban, educated, upper-class/caste image. Party-affiliated women's organisations as well as cadre-based women's groups and the YWCA, a service organisation, had done a fairly good job of lobbying on women's issues with the government. These groups were mostly headquartered in New Delhi and had a "national" image as a result, but I am not sure how well the interests of the subalterns and the marginalised sections, as articulated and led by themselves, were presented in their statements. The women of South India, moreover, would not have been able to participate fully for reasons of distance and different linguistic cultures. It was my contention that documents could be translated, distributed and discussed more effectively and the information fed back to the government if there was a body to coordinate this in the South—one knows from experience that "Knowledge is Power".

As a result, the largest-ever contingent of grassroots women from the South travelled to Delhi for the Conference of Commitment, a large gathering to lobby the central government to make policy decisions that would positively impact women's lives. A very large number of these women also left for Beijing to participate in, lobby and lend colour and significance to the huge Fourth UN World Conference. After returning to India the Advisory Group met to decide how to take the gains of this mobilisation forward. A large meeting of women who had been involved in the pre— and post-Beijing processes was held in Hyderabad in December 1995, in which it was decided that the ten regional members of the Task Force would come together as the National Alliance of Women (NAWO). The meeting also decided that I should be its President. The significance of this meeting was that NAWO became the first, legitimate, autonomous national-level platform for the articulation of the concerns of grassroots and

marginalised women, from across the country: north, north-east, east, west and south.

Since its inception NAWO has been involved in important policy issues. In addition to articulating the concerns of poor and marginalised women at international forums, I have been able to contribute at a national level to policy and planning as well. We have organized several training programmes on the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), for the judiciary, including judges, lawyers and judicial officers. At a personal level I have been on the Karnataka State Planning Board and am presently on the Women's Empowerment Task Force Group for the 10th Five Year Plan. I have an abiding interest in issues of colour and race, due not only to my involvement with the Dalit issue, but also to an early exposure to the issues of black women in the West. It goes without saying, therefore, that I was especially interested in participating in the World Conference Against Racism in Durban in 2001, the third of its kind. As founder-member of the National Federation of Dalit Women—a national platform established for Dalit women in the post-independence women's movement—and as one of the convenors of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, I have been actively involved in highlighting the human rights issues of Dalits since 1998. I was therefore very closely associated with the major mobilisation of Dalits towards Durban 2001.

The NFDW has a specificity of its own, located as it is in an institutionalised setting of caste, class and gender oppression that is deep-rooted in the polity and in society. I would like to treat this issue at greater length. Numerous UN bodies have called on the Indian government to improve the situation of Dalits; the UN Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination has stated that, "Dalits are within the scope of the CERD; that the term 'descent' does not only refer to race but encompasses the situation of Dalits." However, to our dismay (though not to our surprise), we saw that the Indian government delegation with its diplomats, politicians, bureaucrats and academics worked very hard—and successfully to oppose the efforts of Indian NGOs to raise awareness of caste at the WCAR, and to remove paragraph No. 73 of the Draft Plan of Action which specifically addresses issues related to discrimination on the basis of work or descent, namely, caste. To our satisfaction, however, it must be said that despite this seeming setback, we are happy that the whole world now has a clearer understanding of the full ramifications of caste-based discrimination and how it affects our day-to-day lives and self-image, and

our past, present and future. The government stands exposed before the international community in its efforts to cover up such a deep and festering wound in our society. The Dalit issue and caste discrimination in all its forms has now found a place in the international discourse on human rights. This has been the one great achievement of the Dalit movement. In a real sense, this is a tribute to one of the greatest sons of India, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

I look back upon my work both with satisfaction as well as with a sense of how much more remains to be done. I have tried all along to make my life a struggle against violence of all kinds: caste, communal and gender. To a great extent I feel qualitative changes have indeed been brought about for a significant number of poor, marginalised and unorganised labour and their interests protected, to some extent, from the effects of globalisation. It has also been my constant endeavour to protect the secular and democratic fabric of India against the forces of fascism and communalism.

In terms of achievement I feel that I have contributed significantly to building relevant people's organisations among the urban poor, specifically the unorganised sector of labour and for the empowerment of women, with a special focus on Dalit women, and to forge solidarity with regional and global efforts. People in general, including the government and those in power, have been able to recognise the uncompromising stand that I take on issues of social justice.

My house has been a place for friends, activists, thinkers, development workers, trade unionists and the poor. My immediate family — husband Pakkiri Sami, my two lovely daughters; Vandana (20) and Priyanka (13) — are very dear to me. My husband is my comrade and colleague and extends solidarity and support to the causes I believe in, in fact, we work together on many fronts. My daughters have contributed to my work without making any claims on my time and presence. Despite this, I have faced tremendous challenges in my work. The biggest one is that it can be tiring and draining to deal with the same apathy, corruption and indifference at all levels, especially with the state. I work hard to combat these attitudes, and often succeed. While change is slow, I must say that through concerted and organised effort by people over the years we have succeeded in making the government more responsive and accountable to the people.

The hard work and enthusiasm of the poor, especially the women I work with, challenge and inspire me to excel in my own work. Whenever I feel discouraged or tired, one look at the dedication with which poor women commit themselves to their families and society is enough to spur me on. I

have tremendous confidence in the capacity of the poor to transform not only their own lives but to build a just, humane and democratic society. I feel activists like me continue to advocate in whatever way we can to create democratic spaces and opportunities for them. But ultimately people will say, “We have done it ourselves.”

What are the dangers I see ahead? In my opinion, there are several.

- Globalisation and its effects on the vast majority of poor women, and the weaponisation of South Asia. Despite being among the poorest areas of the world, the governments of South Asia spend vast amounts on defence and security to deal with conflict, terrorism and war, diverting scarce resources from human development.

- The culture of war, intolerance and violence pervading our nation, replacing its long tradition of harmonious social relations and dialogue.

- The growth of a consumer culture. Marginalised groups will get more and more alienated from the mainstream, their labour devalued and exploited, and causing intense frustration.

- The non-recognition of the resources and capabilities of women, denying us the reservation of one-third seats in Parliament, thereby excluding our important contribution to nation-building.

- But the most serious of all in my view, is the fact that the Indian polity is not committed to Constitutional values.

I have a vision for our younger generation: they should go back to the founding values of our nation. The idealism, values and commitment to the larger interests of building the Indian community that were the heritage of the Independence struggle should find an echo in their hearts and lives. They should be able to rise to a grander vision — the vision of equality, justice and peace. They should be the agents and subjects who bring about a transformation in our society, polity and in the world at large. At NAWO, for example, we are focussing on developing the leadership of young women, doing our best to involve them in all areas of decision-making. Generating and creating responsive and revolutionary leadership is the need of the hour.

I would like to close with the words of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the architect of the Constitution of India, the world’s largest democracy, statesman and leader of the depressed classes: “Ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom, for the reclamation of the human personality.”

Maya Krishna Rao (b. 1953) is a theatre actor, director, choreographer, and one of the very few women to be trained as a Kathakali dancer, unusually in the male role. She has played Krishna, Arjuna, Hanuman, Bhirna, Ravana, Damayanti and Desdemona. She has also pioneered the one-woman dance-drama form, and her one-person dance/theatre creations include *Khol Do* (1993); *The Job* (3,997); and *Departures* (1999). She has played lead roles in *King Lear*, *Doll's House*, *The Mother*, *House of Bernada Alba* and *The Rover*. Her choreography has been seen in *Viy* (1990); *Dream of Reason* (1991); and *Subhadra* (1995). She has directed *Mummy* (1995); and *The Mother* (1982). She has conducted and participated in a number of workshops and exhibitions including the *American Dance Festival* (1992); *London International Festival of Theatre, London* (1997, 1999); *Faiz Centenary Celebrations, Lahore* (1998); *Prithvi Theatre Festival, Mumbai* (1996); *Restless Gravity Festival, Aberystwyth, Wales* (2000); and *Kiasma Museum Theatre Festival, Helsinki* (2001).



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Losing My Way into Life

MAYA K. RAO

Influences on one's life come from so many quarters that are in themselves quite complex. Reflecting on them, or even saying anything definitive about them is not easy. Artistes find this particularly difficult. We are never very sure what exactly it is that goes into the making of a creative piece of work. We often surprise even ourselves and say, "God, I didn't know that was in me ...!!" This is particularly so, I think, with women artistes, for whom the threads between life and work criss-cross in so many different ways, with one continuously having a bearing, an influence, on the

other. For instance, it was only years after having a child that I realised that it was the daily routine of feeding, bathing and caring that the baby demanded that led me to make my first solo work, I had started looking upon the day as slots of time with fixed activities, as having only that many hours, and I learnt to use a few, snatched moments for artistic practice with the same (though different) discipline that the routine around the child demanded.

I was brought up in the city, in Delhi, daughter of a government servant father and an artist mother. My strongest memories of early childhood are long, hot afternoons spent leaning over the balcony of a “government quarter”, letting the eye wander along a stretch of identical quarters in front, imagining all the different life-stories being played out in each one of them. The days ran into each other, cluttered as they were with things that I mostly wasn’t too keen on doing—homework, dance class, music class, meeting friends of parents and being asked to perform something or the other. For me it was all one. I cannot claim to be one of those for whom “once I discovered the arts I knew this was to be my life”. Nothing so easy and simple. As far back as I can remember, my relationship with the arts has been one of contention, of mixed feelings, swinging from revulsion to passion, with ease.

When I was about six, my mother started a dance class at home just so I would join in and learn as well. The very mates I played pithoo or hide-and-seek with would stand obediently with me in a line and practise the first steps of Bharatanatyam. My mother was a strict teacher. There was no way you could dance with indifference. Every detail had to be just right — the posture, the smile, the look in the eye, the firmness of the footstep in every class, every performance.

My memories of joy in childhood are of missing classes to rehearse a “ballet” (the Uday Shankar-inspired style of dance-drama) or a play for a school function. Of getting a fit-out with the tailor for yet another glittery costume. Of coming home and playing a Beatles album really loud and flaying my arms and legs, or even doing the more acceptable twist. Of going every summer on long, tiffin-carried train journeys to Calicut, my mother’s hometown in Kerala, and taking in the smells and sights of a world that was so different from Delhi. Different, to start with, but slowly, over the years and several visits, that world became a part of my frame of thinking. I am very grateful for those long summer and winter holidays, they saved me from becoming a one-dimensional city brat. Also, that was probably the only time I tasted something called discipline. My mother would invite a *Kalhakali guru* to live in the family taravad, and starting with eye exercises

from some unearthly hour before dawn till dusk, I would have to do nothing but *Kathakali*. Very little monkeying around with my many cousins at such times. I think I secretly enjoyed it because it stretched both mind and body. And it was all done in Kerala where I loved the smells, my extended family, the greenness and the coconut-rich food. The hard labour of Kathakali felt good and somehow in place there.

However, looking back, I realise that although I came from a home where the arts were appreciated and practised, and although I was given all the necessary “classes” and taken to all the concerts, because they had (and still don’t, even today) no firm and acceptable place in society with occupational training and professional routes to follow, this was never presented as a possible practice or way of life. I learnt *Kathakali* and Carnatic music, but quite clearly my parents did not see me becoming a professional in either. *Kathakali*, in those days, had no women professionals anyway. Dance and music classes were something you did only after school hours. How you “performed” in school and the marks you brought back were still of paramount importance. So, in my mind, I did not “sit” in the world of art and neither did art sit in me with the ease and space it probably should have had.

And yet, it was the fact that the arts were not charted out as a predetermined profession for me that went into making me the artist that I became, that I am. I find myself in ironical counterpoise to my *Kathakali guru* who comes from a far more “humble” background, who was brought up in a family with next to no appreciation of the arts and who, despite these factors, got an opportunity very early in life to choose dance as his life and profession! Far south, in a remote village of Kerala, he knew that dance was to be his life at the age of 14!

Early influences, therefore, came to me from very varied sources. *Kathakali* gave me a strong “ground” for training both body and mind. In Kathakali, there are long years of initial training on isolated parts of the body — the feet, the hands, the facial muscles. Slowly, you put these together to learn *padams*, or character parts. You learn the *navarasas* with technical perfection although, as an 8-9 year-old, I had neither known nor experienced the depths of those emotions in real life. You learn to dance a rhythm with your feet while your hands and face describe the most beautiful lotus that you “see” — it did not matter that I saw a lotus only much later in life. Here was a complete system of training. Over the years the body is trained to create a kind of inner energy, an energy that becomes a vehicle for a range of thought, action and emotion. All expressed in a form that is far from anything that belongs to the everyday world. In fact, that is the most

precious aspect, for me, of my training in Kathakali — on regular days of the week I was transported to this extraordinary world where my very breath and energy seemed transformed. Nothing is “natural” in Kathakali — not the way you stand, sit, hold your eyes, or even think and feel and express. After years of practising a form so distant from the everyday, the imagination itself gets trained and, given the right push, is ready to take off into unexplored territories of self-expression. I believe it is the rigour of my Kathakali training that allowed me to interpret a modern story set in the Partition not only in terms of movement but also in terms of an approach, a way of thinking.

By the time I was fifteen or so, theatre had entered my consciousness, and having vied with dance, it won for itself the rank of being far “superior”. My immature mind was not yet ready to understand that Kathakali is theatre par excellence. Kathakali then was only something to practise, to imitate, nothing to do with self-expression or creativity. Our drama teacher in school, Om Shivpuri, the fine actor from NSD, introduced some of us to the works of Shakespeare. Here, for the first time, I discovered a private world of thoughts/emotions/secrets that could move freely back and forth in a world of artistic expression. It was my very own private creative world, nothing to do with the hierarchical world at home or the messy and uncertain status shifts of peer relations, or even Kathakali. This was such a high!! I remember sitting all alone with eyes shut tight in the school auditorium, listening to the “storm music” that we had chosen for *King Lear* and working myself up to a frenzy. Of course, being a girl, I got to play not *King Lear*, but the even more “tough” role of the jester!

What I did not see then was that, having sipped at the cup of Kathakali, Shakespeare was in some ways an extension — another kind of wine, but wine nevertheless. Here, spoken words were the carrier of that heightened imagination, rather than hands, face or feet, as in Kathakali. It was as if Shakespeare’s words and images were creating a ripple in the reservoir of inner imagination that *Kathakali* had helped build in me over the years. I wish someone had helped me realise this, then. But maybe I was too young.

Very early on, thanks to having been trained in male roles in Kathakali and often been made to play Krishna in school ballets, I did not view the world of theatre as populated with specifically male or female characters they were just characters from another world. It was very late in my Kathakali training that I learnt the female role; she seemed strangely new and exciting after all those years of being male! For the first time I learnt to

enact the downcast eye of the female lover, and enjoyed the fact that it was impelled not by coyness but by overwhelming, overflowing, love.

I also enjoyed, in retrospect, the exciting schizophrenia that resulted from the Uday Shankar-type dance-ballets and theatre productions in school, and the classical Kathakali training at home. I delighted in being able to move from one to the other with ease, with no “burning contradictions”!! The Krishna I played could be either in Vrindavan or the Deep South in the Kurukshetra of Kerala’s Kathakali! All of this was included in both my worlds, not either one or the other. As a consequence I have never really known how to take positions in the modern versus traditional debate. Also, for me, the experience of someone like Krishna came from the person I danced rather than the god of mythological stories or the picture in the puja room. In fact, I remember from very early childhood never being able to square the image of the chubby, butter-ball-holding Krishna with the one I learnt to dance/act — the one who leapt about the stage consoling Draupadi, asking her not to cry at the injustice done to her. Or Krishna as the charioteer driving to war and chiding Arjuna for being such a coward.

College days were spent in revolutionary theatre. We were completely taken up with Brecht both in terms of content and approach. That graduated to street theatre in the late ’70s, to making plays with a concern for women at the centre-not so much by design as by accident. Some women’s organizations asked me if I would help do a street play on dowry and I agreed. Here again, though, it was essentially my Kathakali-trained body that played the role of Kanchan, one of the early cases of dowry deaths that caught media attention.

Twice I applied for admission to the NSD, once after school and then after B.A. Both times I got in, but both times I ran away—the first after a week and the second, soon after registration. Undisciplined and sentimental as I was, I could not bear to “study” theatre in a systematic way, complete with syllabuses and exams. Also, by then, at the risk of sounding pompous, I might say that in my own immature, half-baked way I had another perception of theatre, one with far more exciting possibilities, I could not see myself learning by rote whole parts and moving around a drawing-room or any other room, building “relationships” with other characters. For me theatre came from another world of expression. Kanchan, the dowry victim, was real enough but her world of thoughts and emotions had to be recreated through another language, a language that did not belong to the recognisable and everyday. Only then could the poignancy of her story be highlighted. In other words, I was drawn to a kind of theatre-making where you have to get

away from the real to bring out what is real. I think that need, in one way or another has remained with me all these years and has continuously shaped the way I think and communicate.

Of course, I never missed a single play done by the NSD repertory. I sat wide-eyed through performances and re-enacted my favourite roles in front of the mirror as soon as I got back home. But that I did with Helen, Meena Kumari and Madhubala as well. So there were all these women plus the rape or dowry-victim role we crafted for our street plays, plus Angela Davis or whoever else it was who was popular on the feminist front—all these diverse women who populated my mind. I wasn't much of a reader, so Angela, for instance, stood out far more for her black, frizzy hair and defiant brave stance than the stuff of her argument. By that time defiance had become a way of life with me. I knew no other way to be.

There were other circumstances that provided grist to the creative mill. I did a B.A. (Hons) in sociology and an M.A. in political science and finally became a fairly frustrated lecturer of political science in a Delhi college. I had a taste of student politics in my university years, although I probably discovered politics first in theatre (through Brecht) and only then in the world around me. It is special when your taste of something real comes first from the world of art. Of course we imagined that we could change the world through our art. Theatre always happened “on the side” (though very central in my mind and heart). It took me a long time (not till I was 30 and ran off to England) to shrug off its hobby status. In retrospect, I think this “side” status helped in a strange sort of way. I “studied” the social sciences and participated in the political life of the university only because theatre was on the side. The day was so evenly divided between the two that by the time theatre did take centre-stage, I had gained a political way of thinking which became the ground on which I could build a non-realistic theatre. Again, not overtly so. My choice of themes/stories/ideas has never been made for primarily political reasons, but certainly a political sense has shaped the form and content of each piece. Differently in each case, but always present. There is politics in every gesture without the gesture being political, if you like. After every new creation, the political sense gets sharpened as well. For instance, having made one piece on the Partition, I don't think I will return to that theme in the same way, if ever.

It took a very long time, and partly an invisible journey, to move from what I ought to do to what I want to do. Sometimes it is only by going through the former that you arrive at a fuller and sharper realisation of the latter. I am not saying that one stands diametrically opposite the other; often

one subsumes the other, but the important question is, which is the driving force, the prime mover, as it were? For me the questions were not just to do with what profession to take up but also, what kind of theatre to do once I had chosen to do it. Having gained a political sense, a whole range of possibilities within theatre opened up-or rather, I wanted to discover the different ways in which theatre could be practised, the ways in which theatre stood in relation to the rest of society. Again, some of this happened by design and some by accident.

After two degrees and five years of teaching political science I went to England to get a quick degree (one year) in theatre, so that I could finally enter it professionally. I was thirty and had never left home. But, very quickly, everything changed. I left home, got married, made a new home in an alien country. I got into theatre full time, became a student again after a long spell. I was anonymous in this new country, new to myself, new to everybody and everybody was new to me. You learn like you never do when you dive in at the deep end. I had finally let theatre take hold of my life, in circumstances that were both trying and exciting. I found my profession in altogether changed life circumstances, in another country.

After my degree I decided to stay on and work in England for a while; TIE (theatre-in-education) and community theatre were the two areas where new thinking and forms were taking shape there. Luckily I was invited to become a member by one of the best TIE companies then; our brief was to take theatre into the classroom by way of a character, an incident, a chapter from a textbook, a moment in history, and open it out for exploration in such a way that learning becomes an experience for the students, more deeply felt than normal. Most of it was impromptu, with both adult actors and students taking on roles and creating situations for themselves, not for an audience.

These were some of my most exciting years, professionally. Tough and demanding, both in cultural and artistic terms. At the drop of a hat we had to be ready to go “in role” as any person the students asked for. Most often, I was asked to be white, male and English! Once in role you had to sit very close to the students and create a completely believable character, full of exciting learning possibilities. This was realistic theatre par excellence, something I had never practised before, and stayed far from, in India! And yet it was the rigorous training of the imagination, muscle control and concentration I had gained in Kathakali that helped me build those on-the-spot characters. Here it was that I realised another great power of the theatre, the power to transform. Students, sitting in their familiar classroom surroundings, would immerse themselves in the imaginary world we created

for them. They would share confidences with us that they probably didn't with their parents or teachers. They expressed thoughts and feelings that amazed them—all possible through theatre.

Today I am a one-person, one-woman performer, partly by accident, partly by design and partly as punishment! Nothing to do with being brave or courageous. I know no other way to work, or maybe I have forgotten how to. The advantage — you can look at the world and abstract in whichever way or form you like; you can allow your own skills and life experiences to “talk” to each other freely in the process of creating a performance piece. I no longer feel the need to categorise my work as specifically dance or theatre. The early training in *Kathakali* has helped me build an expansive creative language that belongs to both worlds. And theatre helps me to give full expression to that language.

Theatre is an art form that is closest to life in one sense — it is made up of flesh-and-blood people (actors) who live and act out their roles in a created world. It is a form that can move people, shake them up, even. To use a clichéd expression, relevant nevertheless, it holds up a mirror to the world. In fact, that is one of the most exciting challenges of theatre-making-how do you uncover and lay before an audience all the invisible layers of a person, a life situation, an incident, a story?

More and more in the dance world, the term “dance-theatre” is being used to describe a performance. More and more, the line between the two forms is getting blurred. For myself-apart from the fact that Kathakali training brought the two together, meshed and inseparable—when it comes to my own creations, working with one form challenges the other. Dance has flow. The whole body carries and expresses a theme, seamlessly. Body and mind seem one. Theatre, on the other hand, punctures this seamless flow with a sharp “moment”. This moment is one of action or thought, or a situation, something drawn from life, more directly and sharply than in dance. For a split second the head works separately from the body, there's a mind thinking, living. From that swift, sharp action the body moves back to the state of dance, one of flow rather than of moment. The two jostle and challenge each other and in turn help to reveal more layers in your theme. You can play with different kinds of expression, different ways of abstracting from life. Roughly, dance seems to give “body” to a state of mind (much in the way that music does) and theatre gives it “life”.

Working with the two forms, you end up with an interpretation that you would never have imagined at the outset. While making Saadat Hasan Manto's *Khol Do*, for instance, a story of a father searching for his daughter

in the pre-Partition communal riots, I ended up with a 55 minute piece about a search so intense that the father begins to find his daughter in his own body, his fingers, the tilt of his head, his smile. I found I was neither telling a story (theatre) nor simply getting the body to express his anguish (closer to dance). This interpretation lay somewhere in between or rather happily criss-crossing dance and theatre.

My process of making a piece of work (again, arrived at by accident) is to choose a story /theme /idea — something that has moved me or seems to have layers that are elusive, yet captivating. In an (usually) empty room I play some music and, after some moments of concentration, I allow myself to create a “world” through movement and action around the theme or story or idea. These improvisations carry on for a few days. The nature of the music usually greatly influences the style of the piece. I transcribe and edit (if there’s text) and over the next few days, I edit and put together a show from these improvisations. I usually add very little later.

The process of improvisation for me is the opposite of the everyday world. In this world the body leads. From its movements the mind reads and creates meaning, and then leads the body to the next movement. Because I am in some sort of a trance, the mind sometimes dredges up all manner of thoughts and images and ploughs them into the next action. In such a state, much like dreams, we think thoughts that never come to us in self-conscious moments. Everything is different—the colours, the image, the rhythm, the sequence of actions, all seem to have logic of their own. In the early days my improvisations tended to be wordless, the hands doing the job of words, as happens in *Kathakali*. Also, because different parts of the body have been trained to work separately, the imagination may work through the feet one moment and the eyes, the next. A lost memory may be “recaptured” through persistent stamping of the feet. That is what is precious about *Kathakali* training— it makes it possible for the actor to use all as well as each part of her/his body to express, one substituting for the other.

This process has helped a range of experiences and influences to percolate into artistic expression. It has allowed me to move from street theatre to dance-theatre to stand-up comedy to performance art, and in all of them what I can broadly call the “social sense” that I picked up in my student days has helped chart this course and make up its language.

My second piece was *The Job*, a short story by Brecht based on a real-life incident about a woman who lived out twelve years of her life as a man, only to be able to keep herself and her two children alive. I set myself two tasks. I must speak and move together. I worked with objects, household objects that

women use in their homes, to wash, pound, bathe, and knead. In the process of working with these actions I wanted to see if different bits of the story would “reveal” themselves to me. I created the text as I played with these actions. Sometimes it worked and at others it didn’t. When it didn’t I would learn Brecht’s text by rote and play with the rhythm of the words and the action in such a way that that one bounced off the other. For instance, in the action of kneading and struggling with 4 kgs of atta I tried to find the woman’s struggle to keep her secret, and yet get on with the business of living and working.

Departures was a piece that was inspired by an idea, in fact by the various resonances of the word itself. Once, about two hours before I was to leave my home for a long time, I realised I had not done any packing but had spent all my time rearranging my house in the way I wanted it my absence, the way I thought it would be both in comfortable (and comforting) to the family I was leaving behind. At the last minute I threw some clothes into a suitcase so hurriedly that I later realised that most of it was useless for that trip. That got me thinking—about what we choose to take with us, and what we leave behind. About the many departures we make in our thinking, work, attitudes, and about how we realise much later that we have changed but can’t put a finger on how and when we did. And then, of course, all the departures that millions have made to find a new home in a new place—a phenomenon particular to our times.

I feel both full and empty today. Actually they are continuous states, emptying and filling. The more you do, the more you seem to empty yourself and yet, more possibilities emerge. So many places, so many possibilities. A private conversation in a dark movie hall can be the start of theatre, children imagining the 50,000 people in the plane-attacked 104-floor WTC tower, an abandoned textile mill, a cafeteria, a house, a field, a factory, a toilet... and then, of course, the street and the auditorium. Theatre can be either pre-rehearsed or inspired by an idea—impromptu. It can include any of the other art forms—cinema, photography, dance, music—not to speak of a whole array of technology from the laser to the computer. In fact it can begin to change the way we think and see the world, if not actually change the world.

Theatre and, more particularly, solo performance is especially challenging and freeing for the woman performer. Women performers/directors have now come into sharp focus for their refreshing new language and style. Yes, women do get away with murder still, and an artistically thin tear-jerker on the harassment of women can draw mindless clapping from audiences. But

women have changed the creative landscape as well, by continuous self-questioning and by keeping that invisible thread between you and the world taut and vibrating with tension. If you let it slip then, as a woman, you easily slide into playing the victim. And the world will see you as such.

You can distance yourself from the world (since that is what the history of the production process did to us in a sense, left us out), and laugh at it. You can laugh at yourself as a woman. Women are good at this—at irony, at humour—in their daily lives, sitting on charpais during long, sultry afternoons. A good sustained laugh at the mess we're in is probably a good way to crank up the engine of change. We've been through so many phases, movements, images, gazes, ideologies... so many women's lives that are documented and undocumented ...all that is part of the challenge as well.

Looking back on all that I have been through, all that I have done, I don't think I have achieved enough. I wish someone had helped me early on to chart my course with more clarity. I have been too dependent on the accidental break, the windfall. Too easily, I would delimit my space. I wish I had been better helped with self-discipline. I wish my strengths as a young child had been given space to be better realised. I wish men, my father, perhaps, had played a more definitive role in my growing years—I am too much a product of a woman's world. I wish I had grown up as a girl with more ease. I wish I could like myself more. I wish I could just be— without the unspoken anxieties, the fears arising from not being comfortable with oneself, the lack of trust in oneself.

Kalpana Lajmi (b. 1954) is an award-winning Hindi film-maker and theatre personality. She has made a number of documentaries, television serials and films. Her works include *D.G Movie Pioneer*, a bio-documentary of *Dhiren Ganguly* (1978); the feature films, *Ek Pal* (1986); *Rudaali* (1993); *Darmiyaan* (1997); and *Daman* (2001); the tele-series, *Lohit Kinare* (1988); *Dawn* (1997); and *Glimpses of the Misty East* (1997). In 1994, Lajmi won the *V. Shantaram Award for Excellence in Direction* for *Rudaali*.



18

Behind the Camera

KALPANA LAJMI

I had an extremely comfortable childhood in terms of development, money and acquaintance with the arts, especially because my mother, Lalitha Lajmi, was and is a prolific painter and exposed me as a child to poetry, painting, dance, cinema and theatre. My maternal grandmother, the late Vasanthi Padukone, was the major force who built my dreams and opened up the world of literature to me. She was a great raconteur, dynamic and charismatic, self-taught, who spoke and wrote nine major Indian languages. She was a wonderful storyteller, taking me through the world of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, *Panchatantra* and all the historical mythological and folktales of India. She taught me to read and kindled my interest not only in English language and literature but also Bengali literature which stood me in good stead. My childhood was that of protected independence. My father, a very well-bred man, turned me into a little brown *memsahab* with eastern orientation and western education. Not once did my parents make me or my younger brother conscious of the financial constraints they lived with. Books, comics, clothes, education in a convent school, permission to perform in plays and take part in debates, non-interference with my friends, gave me a dream childhood,

I come to the next phase of my growing years which were highly influenced by Shyam Senegal, my mother's maternal cousin. He stepped into my young world more like a surrogate father, and that is how I took my first step into visual media. Through him, I saw the world of Walt Disney, Perry the Squirrel, Christmas parties, advertising, commercials and radio jingles. It was a world of magic, light, colour and drama which I got completely hooked onto.

The Saraswat Brahmins originally hail from Kashmir and settled in Bombay and Karnataka a few hundred years ago. As a community, they are

made up of professional and service people, rather than businessmen. They are a sincere, artistic community, proud of their achievers and always eager to tap the potential in any of their fellow-members. So, despite being born a girl, I was lucky enough to get all the help, support and encouragement I needed from my immediate and extended families.

I initially started acting in theatre while still at school, under the guidance of Mehera Vakil, but because it was a girls' school I was always cast as a boy! In college, I worked under Pearl Padamsee in English theatre and Pandit Satyadev Dube in Hindi theatre, both of which developed me as a total personality. It was the good grounding, both backstage and onstage, in acting, production, make-up and lighting that helped shape my interest in cinema. In 1974, my final year of college at St. Xavier's, I was at a crossroads like most teenagers, really not knowing what to do; I approached Shyam Senegal who suggested that I could communicate beyond theatre if I joined the world of cinema, because it was such a far-reaching medium and outlived all other performing arts. What he said then gave me a focus, and I have never looked back.

I received no particular formal training. Shyam himself was young and fresh and did not operate like a school-teacher. I plunged into the field without any formal knowledge or experience, and initially found the task formidable. It has been a gigantic struggle ever since. I was too young to understand the dynamics of communication, education and fiction, and instead of developing creatively on my own, I behaved like an eager student for the first ten years who always wanted to be patted on the back for every piece of work done. I was paid a salary of Rs. 350 a month and I started from the bottom, carrying film-cans, aging costumes, ironing them, communicating with the arts and costumes department, delivering scripts to artists and eagerly awaiting a chance to enter the editing room. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to either script or do creative editing. In hindsight I was basically a production assistant labelled an "assistant director". I think a film school would have given me an all-round film education and I would have learnt to conceptualise at a much earlier stage in my career. This is something I regret even today.

My other interests include a deep love for reading. I enjoy watching theatre and dance performances and I love watching films of all kinds—mainstream, popular, underground, independent, British, Hollywood, European, Chinese, Australian, Hindi. I have a passion for animals and have adopted a total of ten dogs in my Bombay and Assam homes. I feel serene

and peaceful with them; they help to calm my frayed nerves and give me an unimaginable abundance of love and loyalty.

The benefits of the field in which I work is the immediate limelight that is showered on one's work and the sharp focus given to it, compared to the plastic and performing arts. Cinema has the power to reach out to a very wide audience. But the pitfalls are dangerous because sharp scrutiny, criticism coupled with severe adulation and adoration, can give you a false sense of utopia and security, awaken the narcissism in you and, with equal cruelty, reject and plummet you to the depths of despair. One has to strike a balance in this field, with fame and ignominy, acceptance and rejection, adoration and criticism.

The generation after mine has been extremely lucky because the earlier one had very few women film-makers. There is a huge influx of women now, especially in television, with more exposure to hardware and mass communication than we had. I only wish the next generation would be more committed, shed the urge towards acquisitiveness and concentrate on becoming good film-makers.

Bachendri Pal (b. 1954), one of our most decorated mountaineers, was the first Indian woman to climb Mt. Everest in 1984, She has climbed practically every mountain in the country; led expeditions and difficult treks, including the first women's trails-Himalayan journey in 1997, from Arunachal Pradesh to Siachen; and the Great Indian Women's Rafting Voyage in 1994, from Haridwar to Kolkata. Bachendri Pal climbed Mt. Blanc in Europe in 1986, and in 1993 led the Indian-Nepalese Women's Mt, Everest expedition which created seven world records. She is a member of the Explorer's Club, New York; of the Royal Geographical Society, U.K.; and the Indian Mountaineering Federation, Delhi, among others. She is a recipient of at least a dozen major awards, among them the Padma Shri in 1985; the Arjuna Award in 1986; the National Adventure Award in 1994; the Gold Medal for Excellence in Mountaineering; and the Yash Bharti Award, 1395; she is also listed in the Guinness Book of World Records (1990), and the Limca Book of Records (1997). She is the author of Everest: My Journey to the Top.



19

A Place on Top

BACHENDRI PAL

I was born in the small but beautiful mountain village of Nakuri near Uttarkashi in Garhwal, with the gurgling, playful Bhagirathi River flowing nearby. My parents were a hard-working and extremely self-contained couple. Even though our family was poor, barely managing the essentials, my father taught us how to live and maintain dignity and self-respect—the most treasured family value till today. At the same time my parents also practiced the creed, “Kindness is the essence of all religion.” They were large-hearted, inviting village folk passing by to have tea at our home, and gave grain to the sadhus and pandits who came to the house. This characteristic has been ingrained in me so deeply that I am able to reach out to others and make a difference in their lives—whether it is in my home, in society or at the work place.

I was the third child in the family—girl, boy, girl, girl and boy in that order—and quite a rebel. I developed a tendency to ask questions and was not satisfied with the customary way of life for a girl-child. When I found my elder brother, Bachchan, encouraging our youngest brother, Raju, to take up mountaineering I thought, why not me? I found that my brothers were always getting preferential treatment and all opportunities and options were open to them. This made me even more determined to not only do what the boys were doing, but to do it better.

The general thinking of mountain people was that mountaineering as a sport was not for them. They considered themselves to be born mountaineers as they had to go up and down mountain slopes for their daily livelihood and even for routine work. On the other hand, as a student, I would look curiously at foreign backpackers passing by my village and wonder where

they were going. I would even invite them to my house and talk to them to learn more about their travels. The full significance of this came to me later when I started working. The foreigners took the trouble to come all the way to the Himalayas in order to educate themselves on social, cultural and scientific aspects of mountaineering, as well as to seek peace in nature's gigantic scheme of things.

During my school and college days in the mountains, my love for the outdoors and sports was very natural. I excelled in all the sports that I took up, winning several prizes and proudly bringing them home. Slowly but surely I started getting recognition because of my sporting prowess. One achievement led to another, gradually building up my confidence and self-esteem. I was good at organising outdoor activities, too, and would take a lot of trouble involving young people in such activities. These leadership and organisational skills were inborn in me, just waiting to emerge at the first opportunity. This happened after Everest, when Tata Steel made me the chief of all its adventure programmes and created a whole new department in their company for adventure sports.

Even after my M.A. & B. Ed. I did not hesitate to help out with household work, bringing firewood or grass from high up in the mountains. This was the rare gift I received from my parents, who taught me the true meaning of "education". Till today I feel the same and am always happy and fulfilled after a good day's work, whether at home or in society.

Being an educated unemployed was the severest test for me, but it did not stop me from dreaming-about flying in aeroplanes, going around in cars and meeting important people. When opportunity knocked, perhaps due to some divine blessing, I took up the basic mountaineering course in Uttarkashi. My performance in the course surprised even me, and the vice-principal, a renowned mountaineer, Col. Premchand, emphatically declared me "Everest material"—one fit to be included in an Everest expedition. There was no looking back for me after this. I completed my advanced mountaineering course too, with flying colours. This was a period of self-discovery for me, when I discovered my true potential and inborn talent.

After my selection for the Indian Everest Expedition, a unanimous decision, I continued with my routine of keeping expedition-fit and becoming a competent climber by devising my own novel methods. Our household work required us to bring loads of grass or firewood from the higher reaches of the mountains. I would carry loads of stone from my house in *Nakuri* to higher up in the mountains. I chose steeper and more difficult trails and deliberately climbed over boulders or steep rock faces to acquire

better balance and overcome my fear of heights. I would dump the stone and bring back firewood or grass. On seeing me carrying the stones my father would jokingly tell the others, "You know Bachendri is carrying the stones, perhaps she is building a house for herself high up in the mountains." This way I combined household work with my fitness regimen, which proved to be a boon for me later on.

I was happy with the way in which my mountaineering career was shaping up but it didn't solve my or my family's economic problems. Then, in February 1983, Brig. Gyan Singh, Director of the National Adventure Foundation (NAF) came to Uttarkashi to run an adventure course for teachers at the NIM, and selected seven local, educated women, including me, for a scholarship. I confided in this eminent but sympathetic senior mountaineer and told him that my parents were pressing me to get married to reduce the financial burden on the family. I asked him to find a way out for those who were poor to earn a living, using our interest and skill in mountaineering.

Next morning Brig. Gyan Singh asked us to fill in the application forms for the "Bhagirathi Seven-Sisters Adventure Club". Explaining that this would be a unique organization of girls and women to help other girls find adventure, he promised that the scheme would take care of the financial worries of trained girls and women. Our morale raised sky-high, we got down to training in earnest

By the end of our stay the Brigadier was like a father to us and, at my suggestion, we began to address him as "Chhote Chacha". When Chhote Chacha left Uttarkashi on February 28, 1983 we were in tears, but he promised to return in three months to help us run our own adventure programmes. He arrived as promised on June 1, with 25 sets of camping and trekking equipment to run two adventure courses for girls. With the army's help he also arranged that a tent age camp be put up at Tekhla.

The first group from Jamshedpur had 13 girls; the second party from Meghalaya had 15 lively Khasi girls from Shillong; groups were raised to 20 for each course by taking local girls on scholarship. I was made director of the course and Vijaya Pant, deputy director. Jobs like quartermaster and medical assistant were allotted in turn to the other Seven Sisters, and we were paid an honorarium for our work on the courses. Using the excuse of catching up with his paper work, Chhote Chacha asked us to handle the second course entirely ourselves. I was rather nervous at first, but with responsibility came confidence and everything went off well. When the children told Chhote Chacha what fun they had on their treks with Bachendri

Didi I experienced a great sense of satisfaction and achievement. The Indian Everest Expedition of 1984 was the first ever mixed expedition, and its prime aim was to provide an opportunity to Indian women to face the challenge of climbing Mt. Everest. There were seven women, including myself, in the team. This was my first major expedition compared to other members, most of whom were seasoned mountaineers. The mixed team had its own inherent problems, where likes and dislikes developed and the energy of some members got diverted to non-productive use. Being a greenhorn, my only concern was climbing, which itself was a daily struggle between life and death. However, I had to have my share of bitter experiences during the crucial stage of the Summit attempt—Everest put my skill and determination to the severest of tests.

On Buddha Purnima, May 15-16, 1984, I was at Camp III in a colourful nylon tentage camp perched on the ice-encrusted steep slope of Lhotse. There were ten others in the camp. Lopsang Tshering shared my tent. N.D. Sherpa and eight tough high-altitude Sherpa porters were in other tents. I was sleeping soundly when, around 12.30 a.m., I was shaken awake simultaneously by a hard object hitting my head and a loud explosion. I felt a cold, extremely heavy mass creeping over my body and crushing me. I could hardly breathe.

What had happened? A tall serac (ice-tower) on the Lhotse glacier directly above our camp had cracked, come crashing down and developed into a massive avalanche. This enormous mass of ice blocks, crushed ice and frozen snow thundering down the near-vertical slope at the speed of an express train, devastated our camp which was directly in its path. Practically everyone was hurt, and it was a miracle that no one was killed. Lopsang was able to tear his way out of our tent with his Swiss army knife, and immediately began frantically to try and rescue me. Delay would have meant sure death. Heaving and pushing away the large ice slabs, he dug out the hardened snow around me and succeeded in pulling me out of the ice grave.

No tent had been left standing except the kitchen, shelter. Lopsang and I clambered up there and found N.D. talking on the walkie-talkie with the leader at Camp II. N.S. Sherpa said he had broken some ribs; another Sherpa had fractured his leg, and there were quite a few other injuries. Groans of pain and cries for help could be heard all round but N.D. assured the leader at Camp II that all was not lost—the expedition still had a lot of fight in it.

By now most of us had gathered in or near the kitchen tent. From my first-aid pouch I gave everyone painkillers and prepared hot drinks. Being useful helped disperse the clouds of gloom and depression that enveloped me.

When the male members decided to return to Base Camp either due to injury or shock, the Leader asked me (being the only woman member in that Summit team) whether I would like to give the Summit another try. I said, "Yes Sir, I will." In fact after overcoming this incident I became more confident. This decision was the turning point in my life. I thought to myself, there can be nothing worse than the ultimate truth. God has saved my life and perhaps it is a message for me to keep my tryst with Everest. I felt strangely recharged and developed new strength within me. It was then that I recognised woman-power, the power to keep my tryst with Everest.

On May 22 the regrouped Summit team set off for South Col. Camp IV was situated in South Col, which was also to be the Summit Camp. I was the only woman in the Summit team due to my fitness and performance. The Leader pinned all the hope of the Expedition on me, as this was the 4th Indian Everest Expedition organised particularly for providing an opportunity to Indian women to reach the Summit. I had already discovered my inner strength and I was determined to give it everything I had. I was among the first to arrive at South Col. I knew that other members were still climbing up the steep slopes from Camp III to Camp IV.

I got up early next morning, at 4 a.m. It was quite calm outside. I melted some snow, made tea and had a light breakfast of a few biscuits and half a slab of chocolate. I was excited at the thought of going higher, to heights I had never climbed before. Huddled inside my tent, I put on my climbing gear with great difficulty. The rarefied air with less oxygen made mind and body co-ordination very difficult. At 18,000 ft. the oxygen content in the atmosphere is half that at level. Therefore at 26,000 ft., where I spent the night, the oxygen content was even less. At such heights the body deteriorates very fast and the maximum that one can stay alive at South Col is only a few days. That is why it is said that at South Col and beyond it is not a question of climbing, but of surviving the height, cold upto minus 30 to 40 degrees Celsius, walking with loads on steep ice walls at knife's edge, and braving icy cold winds, sometimes blowing at nearly 100 kms per hour.

After putting on my climbing gear I came out of my tent at 5.30 a.m. I found Ang Dorjee, the Sherpa sirdar standing outside. No one else was about. There was a doubt in my mind about the attitude of other male climbers. Certain incidents during the expedition made me realise that if I were to reach the top, I would have to take the bold initiative and go for the Summit believing in my own climbing skills and strength. I was therefore ready physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, too. I had carried with me

a small idol of Durga to place on the Summit. Durga is a symbol of Shakti, and in such difficult places one does tend to look into the divine.

The steep frozen slopes were as hard and brittle as sheets of glass. We had to use the ice-axe and I had to kick really hard to get the front teeth of the crampons to bite into the frozen surface. I took every step very deliberately on the dangerous stretches. Dorjee set a steady pace, but I had no difficulty keeping up with him. In less than two hours we reached the Summit Camp. Ang Dorjee looked back and asked if I was tired. I replied, no, to his surprise and delight. He told me that the earlier summit party had taken four hours to reach the Summit Camp, and added that if we could keep our present pace, we would be on the summit by 1 p.m. Beyond the South Summit the breeze increased. At that height the eddies of strong winds whipped up the powder snow, reducing visibility to nil. On many occasions, I had to get into a crouching position with my back to the onslaught of the icy wind saturated with fine particles of bone-dry powder snow.

It was terrifying to stand erect on a knife-edge ridge with a sheer drop on either side. I had to dig my ice-axe deep and secure myself by attaching the waist-strap to the ice-axe head. There was some tricky climbing between the South Summit and what is popularly known as Hillary's Step, Ang Dorjee and Lhatoo were already over it, but I was still negotiating its vertical face when Ang Dorjee gesticulated towards the top. I was thrilled—the goal was near! With renewed vigour I was on top of the step in seconds. The sun had made the snow soft, and climbing was easier here than it had been earlier.

We trudged in the heavy powder snow for some time. Then the gradient started easing off noticeably. A few steps later I saw that after only a couple of metres there was no upward climb. The slope plunged steeply down. My heart stood still.

At 1.07 p.m. on May 23, 1984, I stood on top of Everest, the first Indian woman to have done so. There was hardly enough place for two to stand side by side on top of the Everest cone. Thousands of metres of a near-vertical drop on all sides made safety our foremost consideration and we first anchored ourselves securely by digging our ice-axes into the snow. That done, I sank to my knees, and putting my forehead on the snow, kissed Sagarmath's crown. Without getting up, I took the image of Durga Ma and my Hanuman Chalisa from my rucksack and after a short prayer, placed them in the snow. At this moment of joy my thoughts went to my father and mother who had taught me the value of struggle, and the value of hard work-

As I rose, I bowed in respect to Ang Dorjee, my rope-leader, who had encouraged and led me to my goal. I also congratulated him for his second ascent of Everest without oxygen. He embraced me and whispered in my ear, “You climb good—very happy, Diwali?”

By then the news of four atop Everest *was* given to our leader. The walkie-talkie was then passed on to me. Col. Khullar was delighted with our success. After congratulating me he said, “I would also like to congratulate your parents for your unique achievement.” He added that the country was proud of me and that I would return to a world which would be quite different from the one I had left behind.

We summiteers embraced and thumped one another’s backs. Nepalese, Indian and, for my sake, the Seven Sisters and TISCO flags were hoisted and photographed. We spent 43 minutes on the summit. The towering giants Lhatse, Nuptse and Makalu were dwarfed by our mountain; I collected a few samples of stone from a bare patch near the peak.

On returning triumphant from Everest, there was a whirlwind of activities, attending receptions, dinners, meetings dignitaries and all sorts of protocol. My company, Tata Steel, kept a car at my disposal and arranged for my stay in a five-star hotel. All my visits to different parts of the country were lined up through Indian Airlines. Among others, the important people I met were the President of India, J.R.D Tata, Rajiv Gandhi and Indira Gandhi. Mrs. Gandhi looked at me fondly and said, “We want hundreds of Bachendris in this country.” She exhorted me to promote the adventure sport spirit in rural women too, who do hard work but do not relate to it in a sporting manner. I had already made up my mind after climbing Everest to make it my life’s mission to promote the spirit of adventure and enterprise among youth and women.

My journey to the top of Everest was a path-breaking event for other women. My parents, my family, relations, the mountain people, also identified with my achievement and all of a sudden they realized the significance and importance of mountaineering as a sport and career. They all saw for themselves the tremendous respect and recognition showered on me by the people and government of India. Indira Gandhi, who visited Uttarkashi subsequently in 1984 after Everest, proudly reminded the people of Garhwal of what they, and particularly the women, were capable of doing. She described me as the daughter of the Himalaya, bringing laurels to womanhood and to the country.

I was lucky to be working in Tata Steel who empowered me in every way, enabling me to reach out to the masses. The Government of India, Department of Youth Affairs and Sports, also encouraged me with help and assistance. Leadership qualities that were inherent in me were allowed to blossom by Tata Steel. I was given every opportunity to organise and lead expeditions to various Himalayan peaks, which I did safely and successfully.

However, I was dismayed to find resistance from some frustrated male mountaineers on the all-woman Everest expedition. Being a male-dominated sport, they did not want women to enter their domain, particularly for leading and organising, and showed a complete lack of respect not only for women's capabilities but their ambitions. I became even more determined not to be defeated by this fraternity and their negative behaviour, but I had to climb many mountains in Delhi before I could reach the Base Camp of Mt. Everest, leading the Indo-Nepalese Women's Everest Expedition. This expedition went on to create seven world records and has become a benchmark in the realm of Indian mountaineering. Eighteen persons reached the Summit including seven women—India now holds the highest record for the number of women Everest Summiteers, eight in all.

My main objective in organizing such path-breaking adventure expeditions was to bring out the high potential that women have within them, to show them in a different context, where they are in the forefront of organising and leading even in very difficult situations; who undertake challenges and undergo adversity in a sporting way, tackle and solve difficult situations, demonstrate people management, risk management and time management skills and bring out the WOMAN POWER in them, which indeed they have.

I firmly believe that a country's image or status can be built around women's performance. If women are shown in a poor light, it in fact reflects poorly on the country. If women are healthy, resourceful and resilient, so will a country be, and progress that much faster. Opportunities should not be provided in the form of exploitation, extolling unorganised women's labour when such women live below the poverty line, are exploited and bereft of a dignified life.

All opportunity has been provided to me by Tata Steel to build an adventure culture in society, so that we breed young people with grit, guts and gumption. I am continuing with my efforts at personality and character-building, especially among children, as they are the future torchbearers. At a personal level I feel I have been very successful as a human being. The happiness which I derive from my work, I am able to share with other people

in a way which is useful, meaningful and shows concern. To me this is the true measure of one's worth and I quote:

“A True Measure of Your Worth Includes All the Benefits others have gained from Your Success.”

Shubha Mudgal (b.1959) is one of contemporary India's best-known female Hindustani vocalists and composers. As a composer her repertoire of medieval mystic and Sufi poetry includes rarely heard texts from the Vaishnava Pushti-marg poets, as well as the Nirguna poetry of Kabir, Namdev, Amir Khusrau, Nath-panthi poets and other Sufiana poetry. Her compositions have also included music for dancers (Aditi Mangaldas, Prerna Shrivastava, Sonal Mansingh); ballets (Meera, Parikrama, Krishna Katha); documentary films, signature tunes for television serials and films (Mira Nair's *Kamasutra: A Tale of Love* and Rajan Khosla's *Dance of the Wind*). Her discography includes *Songs of the Seasons* (1992); *All More Angana* (1996); *Ab ke Sawan* (1999); *Man ke Manjeere* (2000); and *Surya Upasana* (2001). She was awarded the *Surmani* from *Sur Singar Samsad* (1982); *Aadharshila Award* (1996); *Gold Plaque Award for Special Achievement in Music* at the 34th *Chicago International Film Festival* (1998); and the *Padma Shri* from the *Government of India* (2000).



20

Making Music

SHUBHA MUDGAL

About sixty or seventy years ago, my maternal grandmother told her father about her strong desire to take lessons in Indian music. Born in 1900, her fairly liberal family encouraged her to study, and as a result she was well educated, married by her own choice, and a working woman for the better part of her adult life. But when it came to learning music, her father arranged for her to take piano lessons from a missionary only after much coaxing and pleading, as Indian classical music was not considered an appropriate hobby

for genteel ladies in those days. Unable to convince her father, she had to wait till she was living independently and working as a teacher of mathematics at the Crosthwaite College in Allahabad before she could learn classical Indian music, both instrumental and vocal. I never really heard her sing or play, but in my mother's possession is an old album with several beautiful photographs of my grandmother posing with the sitar, dilruba, sarangi and other Indian instruments. Much later, she made sure that her three daughters, of whom my mother is the eldest, received ample exposure to the performing arts; she also encouraged them to train in India classical music and dance. Each of her daughters was thus, well-versed in Indian music and dance but they chose teaching careers in different academic institutions as their calling in life. It is possible that their choices were influenced by the fact that even though they were encouraged to learn music as a hobby, my grandmother may not have approved of it as a profession for her daughters.

Decades later, my mother advised me to take a year off after I graduated to study music and to come to a decision about whether or not I wanted to make a full-time commitment to it. I made my decision in just about a month, with complete parental support and approval, and went on to become the first full-time professional musician in our family. Unable to fight the family's disapproval, and indeed, the social stigma attached to performers of Indian classical music, my grandmother had to face her father's disapproval when she wanted to learn Indian music; only half a century later, I received not only the family's active support and encouragement, but have been fortunate enough to receive recognition and acclaim from music-lovers in the country, as well.

Women in Indian music have, in the past, had what in everyday parlance would be called "a rough deal". Professional female musicians and performers invariably belonged to a class of greatly stigmatized tawaifs or songstresses, and the disrepute attached to their profession ensured that "respectable" women could not associate with it. Even though they were acknowledged as artistes of indubitable stature and skill, women music-makers of the past were often discriminated against. Students of music would have read of instances of discrimination such as one where residents of a locality petitioned state authorities to ensure that a tawaif was not permitted to purchase a house in their neighbourhood as this would compromise their respectability. Not just the public at large, even eminent musicians and gurus discriminated against tawaifs, and it is only in the last fifty or sixty years that women, other than those belonging to the tawaif

tradition, were encouraged to study Indian music—although music as a profession for women received social acceptance only much later. Naina Devi, eminent exponent of thumri from whom I received my training, chose not to embarrass her husband's aristocratic family by using her family name, Nilina Ripjit Singh, when performing professionally; instead she adopted her pseudonym, Naina Devi, when she began singing on All India Radio.

I am certain, therefore, that my parents' resolve to encourage me to take up music as a profession must have left many in my hometown quite confused, if not aghast and appalled. It was the done thing in Allahabad then to teach music to one's children as a sort of "finishing-school" exercise, but to permit and, worse, encourage a teenaged daughter to take up music professionally was unheard of. However, I don't recall my parents showing any signs of being disconcerted by disapproval, tacit or otherwise, and not once in the twenty odd years that I have been studying Indian music has there been any dwindling of their support to me.

While still in Allahabad, I studied music with other young women, many of whom had the flair and talent to be highly competent and successful performers. Today, however, only one of them continues as a professional musician; the others have chosen—or perhaps been pres-sured into accepting—the more conventional though equally significant occupation of homemakers. They may well be happy with the choices they have made and it would be presumptuous on my part to assume that they have any regrets; but every now and then when I bump into one or the other after a concert, they compliment me rather wistfully, saying that even though they themselves have been too caught up with home and hearth to continue with music, they are happy that I have been able to pursue it professionally—*Hum to ghar-baar mein phans ke reh gaye, tum ko gaate hue dekh ke khush ho lete hain.*

The study of Indian music cannot be condensed into conventional syllabi or courses, and therefore it spreads over a lifetime. For all students of music, irrespective of the gender of the learner, lessons are not restricted to actual taleem or learning of music, where each student gradually learns the mysteries of raag and taal, moving slowly and unpredictably as in an game of Snakes and Ladders, now moving up in progress, now slipping down despairingly with nary a sign of it. There are also the customs, traditions, etiquette and unwritten protocol that rule the world of Indian music to be learnt, in between taleem sessions. Additionally, for women, there are often a few extra lessons thrown in, for some of whom they may bring disillusionment and deep disappointment. The *guru-shishya parampara*

demands that a disciple learn individually from a master for many years, often through a lifetime, living with the guru as a member of the teacher's extended family. In return for the vidya, or gift of knowledge that the guru bestows on the disciple, the shishya or student is expected to be loyal and serve the Master forever more. It is a relationship of immense and sometimes frightening intimacy, and one that may have given female students more than a shock or two. In a culture where the guru-shishya tradition is considered hallowed, it would be sacrilegious to suggest that gurus can be and have been human to the extent of attempting to exploit female students. Such failings on the part of gurus have only been whispered about, rarely spoken of in public for fear of sensationalizing the issue. But we do know that women in Indian music have had to suffer the trauma of watching gurus, revered and regarded as father figures, turn into men with feet of clay who, in weak moments, try to exploit them sexually. It is, in a sense, as heinous and horrible as child abuse. And, as in the case of child abuse, society prefers to keep the issue under wraps. It is only after the most intense deliberation that I have been able to include this point in my essay, in the hope that my candour will not be misinterpreted as a desire to sensationalize. However vulnerable their position, the challenge for women musicians lies in being able to protect themselves against such exploitation.

Motherhood is one of the most significant occurrences in a woman's life. Deeply fulfilling and wonderfully satisfying in a manner that defies description by someone of my limited articulation, it also brings with it changes, both physical and emotional, that can be difficult to handle. My only son Dhaval was born in June 1984, and I continued to perform occasionally till about February-March of the same year before giving myself a break to bask in the care and comfort of my parental home where my son was born. Soon after his birth, my parents made it possible for me to get back to riyaaz, and later to concert appearances, while they looked after my baby. I was able to resume my concert career a mere six months after Dhaval was born, without a sense of guilt or pressure of any kind, only because I was secure in the knowledge that he would be loved and cared for by his grandparents. But not all women musicians are as fortunate. A docu-film on the life of one of the country's greatest divas showed her sobbing uncontrollably as she recounted the time when she had to leave her four-day old baby to perform at a concert, because she could not afford the luxury of resting and recuperating. She was the sole breadwinner for a large family, and the arrival of one more mouth to feed was no cause for celebration. It meant that she had to get back to work, pronto. I have never been able to

forget that moment in the film, and the stark contrast it created with my own memories of motherhood the celebrations, congratulations, gifts, advice offered by concerned family members to rest and relax, and the never-ending supply of special laddoos with their healing effect offered by my grandmother.

Other women musicians have chosen to put their pursuit of music on the back burner till the time their children have grown up and flown from the nest, so to say. Mothers have the onus of bringing up children, even if it means sacrificing their own careers and interests. A father is expected to provide for the family, but it is a mother who must surrender her being to bring up children. Women are certainly not expected to spend long hours tuning a tanpu-ra, practicing all manner of alaaps and taans, studying music books, and worse, traipsing off to distant lands to sing, leaving their children and other family members to fend for themselves!! I have never heard of anyone asking a father, what will become of his children in his absence when he leaves home every single day to work for five or six days a week! Fathers can bring up their children in absentia, not so mothers. Over the many years that I have been performing professionally, I have always been asked about how I manage to balance my duties as a mother with my professional commitments. Strangely enough, the interrogators are usually women, and my reply to their question (saying my son is safe and well looked after by his father) often causes their jaws to drop a mile and more! Suspicion and hostility replace the initial curiosity, as their looks brand me a bad mother. Going against convention and established norms has never been easy, and one could well succumb to pressures created by society. But a passion for music and support from my family have helped me stay on the path I chose, letting my son decide whether I am, indeed, a bad or indifferent mother.

Women music-makers in India have come a long way since my grandmother's days, but traces of the stigma, prejudice and bias can still be found without having to look too far. Hollywood continues to throw up filmi versions of the tawaif tradition, usually through raunchy song-dance numbers depicting tawaifs as cunning, greedy and manipulative women who lure good men away from their marital homes. In the world of art music, women musicians from the tawaif tradition still retain their position as the divas of classical music, revered and deeply admired by all music-lovers; but almost invariably, they refuse to acknowledge their link with the songstress tradition. While some say that they are descendants of apsaras (mythical women musicians and dancers in the heavens) others either gloss over the

past, or insist on fabricating a “respectable” family history for themselves. Instead of paying tribute to the tradition of songstresses with its many wonderful women who kept a musical tradition alive for the future society, with its unfair biases and petty prejudices, has forced their descendants to try and forget their past.

Within the sphere of personal experience, I know for a fact that even with a Padma Shri adorning my wall, I find it difficult to prove my credentials when attempting to rent a place to stay in a residential area in Delhi, which has been home to me for the past nineteen years! There is no denying the fact that even a male musician would find it difficult to prove his credentials to suspicious landlords in Delhi for whom a “company lease” provides a certificate of credibility, but being female and a professional puts you very fairly and squarely in the Zero Credibility zone. It is not only Delhi landlords, however, who are suspicious of women music-makers. Women musicians, particularly those who decide to raise their voice in protest against issues such as infringement of their rights, face the danger of being labelled “controversial” and “aggressive”. Some years ago, a newspaper reporting a copyright battle I was involved in stated that my middle name was “Controversy”!! Within the fragmented world of Indian musicians, I may well be looked upon with suspicion by both fellow musicians, and organizers and promoters of Indian music. The reason is simple. I decided to raise my voice to ask for my rights. If I had been a man, I may well have been lauded for my efforts; coming from a woman, this kind of response is regarded with suspicion and considered quarrelsome and unladylike. The issue of artiste’s rights is one that truly transcends gender and is of equal significance to both male and female musicians, and must therefore be supported, unladylike or not.

I may add that the life of a musician, male or female, can be exciting, challenging, demanding and full of discovery; fulfilling for many and horribly frustrating for some men.

Karnam Malleswari (b. 1975) *’has pride of place as an international weight-lifting champion; weight-lifting for women has become synonymous with her name. She has been winning gold medals since 1990 when she was just 15 years old, and has gone on to win over 25 golds over the years, nationally and internationally. In addition, she has won many gold, silver and bronze medals in world championships; silver medals in the Asian Games; and innumerable medals in senior and junior national championships. Malleswari was awarded the Padma Shri in 1998; the Rajiv*

Gandhi Khel Ratan Award in 1996; the Shiromani Award in 1996; and the Arjuna Award in 1994. She was the first Indian woman ever, and the only Indian, to win a medal in the Olympics in 2000.



21

The Will to Win

KARMAM MALLESWARI

The chameli flower, that's what the first half of my name, Malli, means in Telugu. The second half, of course, is ishwara or god, whom every parent hopes his or her child will be a true reflection of. God alone knows why my parents chose that name, I never ever really thought about it. I just accepted it lovingly as my identity. Actually, more than being a thinker, I've always been an instinctive doer.

I was born on June 1, 1975 at Nandaluru village of Cuddapah district, Andhra Pradesh. My father was K. Manohar, employed as a constable with the Railway Protection Force. My simple life at Srikakulam, which is where we lived, was about enjoying khel kud, big meats and our huge family—three sisters and one brother. We were totally engrossed in each other. To think about it today, it seems that weightlifting was like a family sport, with my eldest sister Narsamma having been a national champion, Krishna Kumari, a junior world champion and the youngest, Kalyani, winning the sub-junior world championship.

Well, it all really started with the eldest among us. My sister, Narsamma, was the achiever of the family from day one. In school it was shot-put javelin, you name it she was participating in and winning them all. I didn't know the word till I came to Haryana but she was really "tagda".

Actually when my sister was busy as a sportswoman in school I was just completely into my studies. But suddenly we saw her go to a gym or *vyayamshala* some distance away. This gym was closed for a long while but

it was open now, with my sister furiously weightlifting there. Another measure of her “tagda-ness”, I guess.

I, like a dutiful younger sister, started cycling with my sister to her gym. We cycled for about 5-6 kms to get there, and I would basically help my sister with her weights. She was the only girl there but that didn't seem to matter to anybody. I myself was really skinny then, but I used to see my sister heave and lift and then all these other girls in her group started joining in too. My father initially had no idea where we cycled to, every day, in the hot sun but my mother always knew and soon enough, my father got to know, too. My studies did get affected but never drastically. Of course, school was to be a part of my life only till Class VII.

School started at 9 a.m. but our routine went something like this: every day 5:30-7:30 in the morning meant-vyayamshala time! Not only that, when school finished at 4 we were back there again. It was becoming obsessive, but if I was nursing a secret desire to try it, too, I didn't know it then. Still, it did irk me when the coach, N. Appana (how can I ever forget his name!) looked at my emaciated self and said, “*Tum kya lifting karogi*, go and cook at home.”

Okay, so I was 12 and a bit of a weakling, but this really irritated me and I wanted to challenge him. How could he just sideline me like that? Why couldn't I weight lift?

All this while my sister was going for competitions at the national level which is something I was really proud of. On one such occasion I went to the gym and saw it in utter disrepair. Really bad shape is the only way to describe it. The floor was all dusty earth—but actually; I am not telling you the whole truth. The person who had the keys to the gym told me, “I can't give you the keys, there is no one else there, and if you drop some big weight no one will be here all the time to help out.” But I was determined now to prove to myself and others that I could do it.

I did lift, they were 10-15 kilogram bar-bells, I think. This was a beginning. Enough, I will show them, I thought. I decided to go and meet my sister in Punjab where she was training. It really felt strange initially, once I went there. No one spoke Telugu, it was a boisterous Punjabi that I heard but did not understand. While being with my sister, her Russian coach would watch over my attempts to weight lift even from a distance. I, of course, had no idea why. For me it was enough that my sister was weightlifting in front of the chief coach for the tri-selections coming up. Soon enough the Russian coach came by and asked about me, “Does she

practice?” After the trials, he asked me to show him what weights I could lift and how. When I think of it today I don’t seem to recall what was so special about the way I did it, although I was glad that an important coach had seen some potential in me. Weightlifting, I realised from the six months intensive training that followed, was all about power and technique. The technique part meant knowing how to use your body, adjust the weight, balance. New concepts, exciting discoveries. Then the medals pedalled in. My first gold at the age of 15 in 1990 was in the junior nationals (this is up to the age of 20, senior starts at 20 with no age limit). There were three of them. Nine new national records were set up, representing one’s state at the age of 13!—each one causing a ripple of excitement in my life.

It was tough to be training in Patiala, away from home for the first time. The comforts of home were forgotten for the rigors of training, but I loved the atmosphere. I also had my sister with me which made things easier than for other athletes from around the country. The schedules were something like this: we would start doing P.T. early, by 5 a.m. and would end the session just a little before dinner. Camp routine really was like an army drill for life: 5:30—wake up call, 6-8 P.T., which all athletes did together, depending on the sport they were in. 10-1:00 training, then lunch and rest. The next training segment was at 4-6 p.m.—a minimum of nine hours of training at any point of time. That hardly gave one time to think too much!

Sometimes people say women should not lift weights; it gives them back problems and all that. A thought like this had never crossed my mind even once. I feel what spirit you do things with, how you concentrate on what you have to do and what you wish to achieve, are important. Also, the fact of the matter is that weightlifting is the mother-sport of all games. Every athlete does it for toning, building muscles. Fifty per cent of anything is learning to do it the right way. When I went into training, I managed to learn Hindi in just two months!

But I find it very strange when I’m asked if men teased me, or if I was joked about because of my accent or body frame as a woman weightlifter. We were all sportsmen, working hard. Even if anyone said anything, I don’t remember because I found every co-participant in the camp equally cooperative.

When you sometimes get to your bed at night so drained of all energy that there is no one left to remove your shoes, two things happen. You sleep with your shoes on. You become sympathetic towards all your team-mates. I have never felt that, unlike team sports, weightlifting is a particularly lonely sport. When concentrating, it is never lonely. I am happiest with my weights. The

only doubt I used to occasionally give in to was when I'd miss my parents. I had given up formal studies, was sacrificing all my so-called fun-loving years to the serious pursuit of weightlifting for the country. But the minute I won a medal this thought would take a backseat!

In fact, do you know that weightlifting is one sport in India which has brought the country the most number of laurels and medals in the international arena? I represented India every year at the international level, at various world and Asian weightlifting championships from 1990 onwards, getting 4th, 5th and bringing home medals.

At the 1994 World Championships held in Turkey I won two golds and one bronze, and -in 1995 in China, I got three gold medals. The same year, in the Asian Championship held in Korea I won three golds, and in 1996 in Japan, I won a gold medal. I have also held the national championship from 1990 till today in the 52 kg body weight category, and from 1992 in the 54 kg category. Competing then in the 69 kg event, as a 25 year old, I give full marks to my coach! The order of medals probably matters only for my own understanding of my growth. I won the world weightlifting title in my then class (54 kg) with a new record, by lifting 113.0 kg in the clean and jerk. (Malleswari, who went on to win the contest's gold medal, beat the previous record of 112.5 kg set by China's Long Yuling in December 1993.)

Hand-in-hand with the best moments comes the not-so-good ones to cast a shadow on my career. In the 1997 World Championship I was well prepared and beating my own best, but just two days before the lift I got a back injury and missed my chance of winning. This injury-ridden practice highlighted how some coaches want us to go for every competition for their personal glory, even if we've hurt ourselves really badly. I've never let it affect me, but I know many weightlifters have suffered.

One thing I saw there which I feel is missing in the otherwise well-equipped sporting facility in India is: the individual coaches of the Chinese team-mates, whereas we had a common coach for the whole team. A teacher who has to take care of fewer children can do the job with more focus. Especially in our country where there is a lot of politics in everything, individual coaches would make all the difference to one's performance; individual attention to body parts that are being unduly stretched, helping them tone up and heal, recognising one's strong points and minuses—it all adds up to greater concentration. In fact, having seen a fellow weightlifter being harmed by our common coach, I couldn't hold back any longer and when Uma Bharati, the then Minister for Sports came and asked us about improvements, I asked for coach Tanin, the Russian coach who discovered

and helped to mould me when I first started out. Uma Bharati asked me if his coming would get us a medal in the forthcoming Olympics. For some unexplained reason I confidently said, “Yes, it will.”

The highest officials seem to listen to coaches at the training centres, who in turn are busy promoting their own disciples as well as keeping the foreign trips going for themselves. Despite this, when we went for the Olympics, after all the controversies which you must have seen in the sports sections of all media, nobody performed well in the whole team.

When we go for international competitions, especially the girls, we always support and root for each other. While individually I had qualified, my coach had not been able to come. There was no fan support here and there rarely is at all in a sport like ours, which is why we would not leave after our turn but concentrated on encouraging the team member who had the next lift. This was the Olympics after all. The competitors were the same as in other competitions, the hype was there all across the media, and winning here brought more glory than some of the other country-led contingents achieved in worldwide competitions. What was it about the Olympics? I wondered. In that euphoria of trying to rise for India I overestimated my capacity and went for gold. In the 69 kgs weight category I had done 247 kgs. Before, so after lifting 240, I went straight for 247 instead of rising steadily from 242 onwards. Disbalance at both ends spoilt the effort.

I came home with a bronze and was very overcome when they played the National Anthem for me.

September 19, 2000—I had done it. I was told I was the first Indian woman to bring back an Olympic medal! My country really opened its arms to receive me in every corner. The best little surprise was on the very day of getting the medal, they were ready to let us sight-see Sydney. In all my foreign competitions this was the first time! It seemed like a honeymoon, finally, with my husband! Local Indians came and congratulated us and I was accorded a warm welcome by the state government at Hyderabad- After the ceremonial welcome at the airport, I was able to call on the governor and the chief minister, Chandrababu Naidu, exploring possible sites for a weight-lifting academy. In a procession from Tank Bund to the Lal Bahadur Stadium for a civic reception, I could sense the shared pride. It made me feel so proud of my parents who had let me do this, sacrificing so much themselves.

This victory procession had the participation of students, officials and the general public, which was followed by the felicitation in which the state

government announced the allotment of land worth Rs 2.5 million in the prime Jubilee Hills area, and presented me with a cheque for Rs 2.5 million to build a house in Hyderabad. Also, one million rupees for the proposed weightlifting academy. The civic reception was attended by the Lok Sabha Speaker, G. M. C. Balayogi, Assembly Speaker, Pratibha Bharati, All India Olympic Association President, Suresh Kalmadi and other dignitaries. Later I got awards from the President of India. Today everyone from Chandrababu Naidu to Abhay Chautala are encouraging me. I feel this is the true result of my sacrifice. Money can be earned by anyone but respect from the land's highest dignitaries makes me think back to my doubts, feeling that too much had been sacrificed. All those wrist, elbow, shoulder, knee and back injuries were worth the effort.

Here I was, a once-skinny girl, born into a lower middle class family with only training as my daily reality. With no exposure to late nights, watching movies, picnics, college life or the carefree life of the typical teenager, I still felt light and free but that was because training had become an integral part of my life.

For someone who didn't have any particular desire to marry, I discovered a weightlifter companion. My husband used to be a weightlifter himself and we trained together in Patiala, or was it Nehru Stadium? Probably both. After we married in 1997, within two days I left for a training camp. No honeymoon, no nothing. I didn't mind and my husband took it wonderfully, he totally shares the awareness of what being a world-class weightlifter involves. Yamuna Nagar, where we settled, was just two hours from Patiala so my husband would drive down, often on weekends, and we'd spend our Sundays together. There were times when I would call, feeling guilty as a newly married wife, wondering what my husband was eating, and he'd say, "Don't worry, I've made some noodles and had them." I really recognise my husband's worth and how his support has helped me get the right focus and desire to train. Very few people are so lucky. He has a business in financing today. I'm a deeply religious person, although I don't do any elaborate puja of any sort on a daily basis. But I do light an agarbatti near *Ganeshji* every day. It's also been such a long time since I saw a Telugu film. Having lived in Punjab and Haryana, now I am a true-blue Amitabh Bachchan fan. I also adore watching television. Comedy is more my type of entertainment, especially after a hard day's practice. I sit down to watch *Office-Office*, *Hum Saath Aanth Hain*. No cricket, no cry baby serials. I love to read the letters sent to me sometimes, and realise that it's always teachers who send me the most encouraging letters.

Otherwise, in my own life, I have seen that people can malign you for no fault of yours. When a reporter from India Today tried to pull me down saying that I like beer and fried food, or pitting one weightlifter of the same team against another, I realized that these accusations should not grate. One's goal, support from your loved ones and clarity on how hard you want to work are the best values to focus on. When I see 16-20 year old girls just roaming around restaurants and college canteens, I realise that there are no excuses for not making something of your life.

After all these awards, I am comfortably rich and I can afford all the amenities and luxuries I never even dreamt of. Now that I am a mother, I have a full home. My in-laws, my husband, my small baby, my big gym next door, Patiala close by. I am determined to give the 2004 Olympics my best chance, after which I intend to take up the offer of setting up an academy and training others. Especially other women. So many of them are keen now, from Srikakulam and Manipur, since Kunjarani is from there. Our sport is so rich in talent, and its facilities in this respect are comparable to the rest of the world. For young girls who want to try weightlifting, my advice is that the best age to start is 10 years and second, all states must have a compulsory weightlifting coach at sports training centres.

This melli has smelt success and wishes to climb higher, faster, stronger, in the best Olympian spirit and then devote herself to others.

My name kind of makes perfect sense now.

Based on an interview by Tisha Srivastava

END